



"The arrival in London is announced of a group of French officers and men who have escaped, via Russia, from prisoner-of-war camps in Germany. They are joining the forces of General de Gaulle." That was four years ago. Now for the first time the story of these men, as narrated by Jean Brillhac, provides material for a book which will remain unique among the records of this war. These men, captured in various places on the battlefields of France, endured, together with countless others, a captivity which amounted to mass deportation. They saw barbed wire "from the inside", and lived on bread and water. Most were forced to work on farms, in factories, and on the military roads of the Reich. To avenge themselves and to take up again a fight that had been too hastily abandoned, they escaped. . . . Here are individual stories of some of these men, typical of them all—a revelation of conditions in Oflag 2D and Stalags 2A, 1 and 2B. The long preparation for escape and the almost incredible adventures of those who got away will stir the reader however surfeited by war-books. "One hundred and eighty-six men have contributed, if not to writing it, at least to the fact that it has been written."



## THE ROAD TO LIBERTY





Photo: L.N.A.

CAPTAIN (NOW GENERAL) BILLOTTE  
WITH

BRILHAC

BOZEL

VAUDREUIL

CLAYE

JEAN BRILHAC

# THE ROAD TO LIBERTY

THE STORY OF ONE HUNDRED AND  
EIGHTY-SIX MEN WHO ESCAPED

*With an Introduction by*  
D. W. BROGAN  
*and illustrations by*  
LOUIS MITTELLE  
*and from photographs*



LONDON: PETER DAVIES

This is a collective book. One hundred and eighty-six men have contributed, if not to writing it, at least to the fact that it has been written.

In their name, I dedicate it to the man who was their "Starschi",

COLONEL PIERRE BILLOTTE

*Translated by*

BAPTISTA GILLIAT-SMITH

***Durga Sah Municipal Library,  
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## INTRODUCTION

From childhood, we have been all fascinated by stories of captivity and of escape, by the fate of Joseph sold by his brethren, by the escape of the Duc de Beaufort from the donjon of Vincennes. We are living in an iron age when the once rare and dreadful lot of the prisoner has become the fate of millions, when the prayer "show Thy pity upon all prisoners and captives" has gone up from more tormented hearts than in any previous age. M. Brillhac's book is both the story of hard captivity and of successful escape. It is, in this sense, a success story. But it is more than that. The success is not merely the escape to Russia, the self-deliverance from German bondage; it is far more the attainment of the decision to escape, the triumph over the lassitude, the despair, what the medieval monks called, the *accidie*, that is the perpetual danger and temptation of the prisoner. To decide, really to determine to escape, that was the first moral triumph of the men whose fate is described here. The physical success of escape was the result of this moral triumph.

It is the first triumph of this book that it makes plain this truth. It makes plain how dangerous was the moral situation of the French prisoners. Not only were they the victims of an unprecedentedly rapid and complete defeat, they were the victims of a brilliant German political triumph, the creation of the Vichy government as an instrument of moral and mental confusion among the million and a half French prisoners. By appealing, publicly, for an armistice while fighting was still going on, Marshal Pétain secured, whether he willed it or not, that hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen should be not only captured, but captured in circumstances that made their moral ordeal even more severe than it need have been. To learn from a Marshal of France that you had not

only been beaten but betrayed was, for many an unfortunate French soldier, the last straw.

In some it bred lassitude and despair. In others it bred day-dreaming and pardonable but fatal illusions. Some of the most moving and disturbing pages of this book reveal to us that deadly confusion. There was the belief in "an honourable peace between soldiers". But it was easier to cling to that illusion in Vichy than in German camps, haunted by memories of comrades murdered because they were feeble, or black or insubordinate, made hell by present brutality and insolence. There it was known that a brilliant Negro officer had not been killed in battle, as it pleased the military chiefs in Vichy and North Africa to pretend, but had been murdered. There the standard of military honour shown by German soldiers was better appreciated than it could be at Montoire. There was again demonstrated, by stubborn soldiers like Captain Billotte, how much truth there is in the old dictum that "the way to treat a Prussian is to stamp on his toes until he apologises".

No, the temptations of the captives were not those of the journalists and politicians of Paris and Vichy. But there was, first of all, the temptation to believe that the journalists and politicians of Paris and Vichy were able, resourceful, patriotic men of good faith, deeply engaged in countermining the Germans, in being too smart for them. This belief accounted for the otherwise unaccountable prestige of Laval. He was regarded, rightly enough, as having the qualities of cunning and unscrupulousness required; it was not at first realised that his German masters were just as cunning and far more powerful. So it was, too, with the hopes put in Darlan and Déat; it was not because of elevation of character that they failed, but baseness was not enough.

More natural were the legends that grew round Pétain.

That the hero of Verdun was holding, not selling the pass, was a belief that, in 1940 and 1941, was very pardonable. His fame, his rank, his profound conviction of self-righteousness, all naturally imposed on bewildered, ill-informed, unhappy men. In this atmosphere, the legend of the venerable saviour of his country grew naturally. He was believed to have resisted—and so prevented—a German occupation of the whole of France in 1941 by his mere prestige; the role of the Marshal at the decisive moment of the Allied landings in North Africa was to show the folly of this illusion. But it was believed for long enough to profit the Germans, which was why they tolerated Vichy in the first place. When at last the news filtered through that Frenchmen were still fighting—dying heroically like Cunéo d'Ornano, triumphing heroically like General Leclerc—there was a stirring, from the German point of view a dangerous stirring, in the camps. Those prisoners who had found it impossible to believe in the Armistice, now found it easy to accept and welcome the news that there were Frenchmen who had never surrendered, that there was a chief, a rallying-point, who had preached resistance in the darkest hour, the hour when it seemed likely that Britain would go the way of France. So there grew up the legend that made General de Gaulle and Marshal Pétain partners: the General outside and the Marshal inside France were working together for its liberation. The sentencing of General de Gaulle as a traitor, the General's vigorous denunciation of the Marshal, were both a comedy played by mutual agreement. And whereas the prisoners had good reason to know how illusory was the hope of a real understanding with Hitlerian Germany, they had not the same means of knowing with what ferocity Vichy, the government of the Marshal, pursued the Gaullists inside France, how effectively Vichy made itself the complacent servant of the

*Wehrmacht* and the *Gestapo*. Of the many ills inflicted on the French people by the German marketing of Pétain's reputation, this was one of the most serious; and that the instrument of this policy of national demoralisation should end up a humiliated and ludicrous prisoner in German hands, is one of those historical revenges that too seldom gratify our taste for appropriate justice in public affairs.

Another seduction put before the prisoners was tempting enough. Why not play ball with the Germans, serve them in useful but not traitorous ways and so regain freedom? It was the moral equivalent of that temptation to break his parole that Stevenson so kindly described and so generously understood in the case of the old French officer in *St Ives*. By such compliance you could get back to France, you could serve her, return to your family, perform your private and public duties. "Le bon père de famille est capable de tout," says a French proverb. We should not judge these fathers (and sons) too harshly.

But it is against such a background that we should see, in its true proportions, the nature of the decision taken by the men whose history is told here. Some had begun to plan escape even when they were still units in the dreadful forced march to German prisons. Others were galvanised not merely by their pride and patriotism, but by the realisation that despite Pétain and Weygand, Flandin and Laval, the war was not over, was not won by the Germans or lost by the British. Captain Billotte's projected lecture on the (insoluble) tactical problem of the invasion of Britain is worthy of Courteline in its humour, but the joke contained a profound truth. As long as the island held out, there was hope; and the Germans and Vichy could not conceal that the island *was* holding out. Britain resisting, and with her, an unknown number of Frenchmen who had the honour and good fortune to represent a France that had made no armistice, that had

never laid down her arms: these were decisive facts. To escape to join these men, to share their dangers, their good fortune, that was another stimulant to action.

Another point to be remembered is the boldness of the decision to escape to *Russia*. The captives could not have that supply of hindsight which is now so abundant; they could not know that a German-Russian war was inevitable, *soon*. They were going to a country which was on ostentatiously good terms with Germany and with Vichy. They were going to a country against which many of them had political and social prejudices of a very serious kind. They were going to a country whose chances of successful resistance, if war came, were in general no more highly estimated than had been the British chances.

It would be impertinent and foolish to dwell on the dramatic escape stories told here. They speak for themselves, though some of the testimony given may be a little neglected—for example the testimony to the heroic unbreakable, unbribeable, unterrified loyalty of the whole Polish people, the nation where alone Germany sought quislings, high or low, in vain. There the value of an old, unbroken tradition of heroic patriotism, bred under German and Russian oppression alike, was tested and not found wanting.

Then came delivery if not liberation, the entry into Russia, the knowledge that the Germans had been defeated in this series of individual victories over force and cunning. Next came the day hoped for, when Russia was attacked and they were on friendly, no longer neutral soil, when such symbolic changes as the saluting of Polish officers by Russian soldiers were auguries of the final triumph, the road open to join that free and fighting France of which these men had never despaired. That France now stands erect before us and the world. But at this moment, there are still hundreds of thousands of



military and hundreds of thousands of civil prisoners in Germany. They are the permanent wound in the flesh of the French people. Their ordeal has been the hardest to endure; their salvation is a most urgent problem. This book will serve an even better purpose than its great merits as a narrative ensure for its success, if it reminds us of the complexity of this problem, of how deep is the darkness in which these captives have had to live. The 186 captives of this book who won their freedom paid a great price for it and more than deserved their success. We may be sure that neither M. Brillhac nor his comrades want us to condemn or forget the less fortunate, even the less audacious, who have known for nearly five years the bitterness and degradation of captivity, but who now, at least, have not only the stimulant of hope in a speedy deliverance, but are saved from the temptation to believe that France was, even for a moment, adequately represented by the men of the capitulation of 1940.

D. W. BROGAN

*Peterhouse, Cambridge ,  
February 22nd, 1945*

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## FOREWORD

ALMOST three years have elapsed since the arrival of the 'Russians'. My mind goes back to September 12th, 1941: "The arrival in London is announced of a group of French officers and men who have escaped, via Russia, from prisoner-of-war camps in Germany. They are joining the forces of General de Gaulle."

This brief text, a paragraph of three lines, meant simply that a hundred and eighty-six men had come back to life. A particular destiny was coming to an end. We were returning to normal, in so far as de Gaulle's army, at that time, represented normality. The Odyssey that had led us from the hills of the Ile de France to the plains of Germany, Poland and Russia, and even into Arctic lands—of this there remained only our memories, our fierce love of France, and the thought of our comrades left 'out there'.

Our story is a long one. We are ghosts from another world, witnesses to strange things. We had been caught up in the turmoil, captured in various places among all the battlefields of France, torn from our native soil, and we endured, together with hundreds of thousands of others like ourselves, a captivity which amounted to the mass deportation of a people.

We have mouldered in concentration camps. For months on end we lived on tepid water and black bread. We know what barbed wire looks like 'from the inside'. Most of us were forced to work on farms, in factories, and on the military roads of the Greater Reich; we have discovered for ourselves, day after day, that old-time slavery is not a thing of the past.

To end the slow death of imprisonment, to avenge ourselves and to take up again a fight that had been too hastily abandoned, we escaped. . . . For each of us,

peasant or gentleman, professional officer or student, there came a day when we decided to take our chance and said: "Here goes!" One was in Poland, another in Pomerania, the majority in East Prussia—almost everyone, in fact, was somewhere or other in the east of Germany. We chose Russia to escape to, and to-day we congratulate ourselves upon our choice because, though others have escaped from Germany, we are practically the only escaped prisoners who have been able to join the Free French Forces.

We have a hundred and eighty-six escapes to our credit (two hundred and twenty, if one counts those of us who remained in Russia, and even more if one were to count the unsuccessful attempts). This means that we have paid dearly for our freedom. Some of us have had to endure many terrible ordeals. More than one man saw his comrades slain at his side or recaptured by the Germans. Almost everyone rediscovered the meaning of hunger, thirst, cold, fear, and experienced all those primitive emotions which were said to have been done away with by two centuries of mechanised civilisation.

In Russia, the two hundred and twenty adventures became one single adventure. Each one of us has 'his own war'—but no longer his alone; 'his own captivity'—but one he has shared with France. On the other hand, our escape is a common denominator, something our very own; and the Russian *détour* and the Odyssey of Spitzbergen belong to us alone.

There were weird pass-words, there was a mysterious code whose secret we shall betray perhaps only to our wives and children; these things reawaken a past which is quite unreal. When we refer to 'the story of the cow' we understand one another. A few incomprehensible syllables: 'Los . . . Zaftra', and the past rises up in heavy clouds. A christian name, 'Eugénie', and we begin to

dream. . . . No, don't try to understand! for Eugénie, in her chastity, will always remain our collective property. She symbolises the dusty steppe and the winter sledges. She, a young girl in a flowered frock among a hundred and eighty-six tramps in rags, brings back memories of tormented nights, the noise of riots, an underground tunnel, Bren-guns mounted behind barbed wire, and the powerful Henri Claye stirring up the crowds to protect the Croix de Lorraine, which the prisoners of Hut 26 had traced on the ground and which a madman wanted to trample underfoot.

I know that to-day each one of us has found again his own individual destiny; yet when we let ourselves be carried away into the past each becomes again the person he was two years ago, or three, far away out there, in countries whose names sometimes we didn't even know. Fleury is not a hot-headed corporal: he's the fine chap who splashed about in the filth beside the general latrine, somewhere out near Vologda, in order to build a mud hut. The ex-Captain Billotte will never be more admired than he was by the hundred and eighty-six, when, on a stormy night when our lives were perhaps at stake, he stood up in his shirt-sleeves, muddy trousers and sandals, on the front steps of a house where there was mutiny and called out in a voice thick with rage: "Please, tell this individual I was in command of a battalion of tanks on the French front, and I will not tolerate giving the salute and not being saluted in return." The individual was a colonel; he stood to attention and saluted.

In the meanwhile the others remained prisoners. . . . Their imprisonment is now in its fourth year. . . . What is their life like now? We no longer know . . . or rather, we do, since we are all prisoners of a common past. Moreover, since none of us bought freedom at the price of honour, we are not afraid of giving way to memory.

Often, and quite unintentionally, a picture suddenly looms up, or a forgotten gesture is remembered. I look at my watch: ten past twelve. The men from the last huts must be making for the cook-house—the men from Number 17 or 18. I can see them. They are queuing up, each with his little bowl in his hand. They no longer even pull faces at the soup which is ladled out to them. But it is still as bad as it was two years ago. "Their mouldy old turnips again"—sighs the Superintendent of Finance, from S . . . "Does anyone want my soup?"

In the same way, no matter how much I may imagine that I have grown accustomed to freedom, just as I am going to bed I am surprised at not feeling the wood of the bedstead beneath my ribs, or the curved plank which, out there, served as a bolster, beneath my head. English beds are too soft. . . . And then I am seized with anxiety because, out there, bedtime is the most deadly time of all. In the camps all the lectures have been given three times over; all the plans of the various societies for the regeneration of France are ready. Everyone knows everyone else so well that probably, by now, no one has the courage to speak of himself. This is the hour when each man bends down in secret over his snapshots. . . .

On the farms and in the Kommandos, nine hundred thousand prisoners have just lain down to rest in their dormitories, in barns or in lofts. The windows are barred; behind the padlocked door a sentry snores. . . . To-night, behind all the barbed wire of Germany, there are Frenchmen consumed with hatred and bursting with rage and despair, but unable to tell anyone of the burden of their loneliness; Frenchmen who are amazed that Petain should sleep soundly and eat well, while they have been in the throes of useless agony for over a thousand days.

## PART ONE

### CAPTIVITY

#### I

#### THE LAST DAY OF FIGHTING

COMMUNICATIONS have broken down. Germans are ahead, behind, everywhere. Between the explosions of shells or bombs one can hear on all sides the crackling of their machine-guns, like rattles echoing one another. This is what the last day of fighting was like for nearly all of us who were taken prisoner on the field. After a few weeks, or only a few days, of fighting one found oneself stranded in a wood, a village or a house, with the terrible feeling that the whole of France lay behind, open to the invader, and that there was nothing left to protect her. Then we would be hemmed in on every side; Panzers would begin overtaking us, to plunge deeper into the heart of the country. Finally, when our last rounds of ammunition had been used up, there would be a sudden attack by Germans advancing from tree to tree and from bush to bush, with loud cries at every leap, and we would be surrounded by a band of soldiers in field-grey. One minute we were citizens of a free country, the next we were prisoners.

Naturally the picture varied. Some were caught in the horrible confusion of a moving battle with no front line and no definite positions, and were picked up on the road by a German column coming upon them unexpectedly. Some were captured in the inferno of Dunkirk after they had seen the last English ship weigh anchor. Others, who at first had managed to escape, only surrendered on the Rhône or on the Loire, when they were worn out with exhaustion.



Finally, half of us were taken prisoner without having fought at all. They were either members of a large unit which surrendered *en bloc*, or they were among those who were handed over to the Germans.

Then a strange life began. The initial formalities never varied. We were disarmed amidst hoarse shouts, our tin helmets were wrenched off and went rolling on to the ground, our rifles were piled up in stacks. Usually one had to abandon everything: gas-masks, cases, kit-bags, belts . . . Then, forward march!

Many of us found it difficult to realise that we were prisoners. The eleven hundred thousand men handed over to the invader *after* the public request for an armistice were the ones who took longest to understand. As people said in those days: "They couldn't believe it. . . ." Meanwhile those in whom exhaustion had not deadened every reaction felt immense disgust mingled with despair, and often also a silent fury against everything, beginning with themselves. Were they to forget, to put the whole thing out of their minds and to start again from scratch? But where could they seek refuge, what could they turn to? The past was slipping away, leaving nothing for their minds to cling to. The present weighed down their thoughts and stifled them. But nobody, however dazed, could escape from this drama of history behind which he already detected some sinister trick. Each man felt that he had ceased to be himself, and as though his life had been cut in two, so that the prisoner of to-day was incapable of recognising himself in the Frenchman of yesterday. Some were already becoming obsessed with the thought that from now on they were no more than the dead cells of France. Not many comments were made. "It's all up!" said one man. "The swine," muttered another, and no one would know to whom nor of whom

he was speaking. That was all. But if a German, using all his knowledge of French, were to say with his exquisite tact: "You will see vat your Paris will look like in a week!" ten tired voices would murmur: "All right! All right! Talk away. But, as for Paris, you're welcome!"

As a matter of fact, we felt less indignant with the Germans than with the Frenchmen who were responsible for the defeat—for the monstrosity of those battles between tanks and ill-equipped foot-sloggers, the absurdity of those marches and counter marches, and the desertion of more than one officer in the face of danger.

As regards the Germans, our resentment was mingled with astonishment and even with a secret admiration which they set out to encourage in us by making a display of their enthusiasm, their youthful vigour, their faultless uniforms and their equipment. There was rarely any hatred. Like their ancestors of 1793, most of the Frenchmen of 1940 believed in the original goodness of man; but, unlike their forefathers, they had begun to doubt the wickedness of tyrants.

When they were brought face to face, for the first time, the defeated endeavoured to size up the conqueror.

From the very start, the Frenchman was shocked by one particular characteristic in the German—his naïve appetite for, or rather, his insolent pride in, revenge. "Ah! ah! you used to sing: 'We're as happy as fish in water', " a little Feldwebel sneered at the prisoners who were shut up in the Town Hall of Jolgonne, on June 12th. This kind of reaction, which struck him as unworthy of civilised beings, made the Frenchman both furious and amazed. But, above all, he was loath to admit the validity of a success which was not the outcome of an equal struggle with equal arms. An easy excuse, one might object, a sentimental artifice to justify collective failure, or what is worse, individual failure. Perhaps—but it was also and

above all a genuine protest against a victory which, in the final analysis, was no more than one of brutal force.

However, the ill-feeling caused by frequent cases of German treachery or brutality at the time of capturing prisoners was equally genuine. The most humble French peasant found that he knew by instinct the few rules of elementary humanity known as 'military honour' and felt outraged at seeing them broken. He was all the more baffled and horrified when he saw Germans indulging in useless treachery and gratuitous violence. There was no need for such brutality. On the contrary, the crushing superiority of the Germans should have enabled and encouraged them to do without it. But there were facts, endless facts, and witnesses.\*

On the evening of June 5th, at Quesnoy-sur-Airaines, in the department of the Somme, a German officer had ordered artillery lieutenant Spitz and five other Frenchmen who were taken prisoner that morning, to be shot in the nape of the neck with a revolver. His pretext was that their wounds, which as a matter of fact were only slight, prevented them from marching, and that he had no time to waste over them. On June 6th, near Doullens, eight Madagascan prisoners of the Metz Division had to pay with their lives for the crime of not belonging to the Aryan race. On June 7th, at Airaines, Captain N'Tchoréré, a black officer commanding the 7th Company of the 53rd R.I.C.M.S., was shot through the head by a German Captain. Captain N'Tchoréré had refused, when captured, to stand in the ranks of the captured soldiers, and had taken his rightful position at the head of the group of officers.†

\*The facts given here are taken exclusively from our personal experience and the experience of our fellow escaped prisoners.

†The *Mémorial de l'Empire*, an official booklet published in Vichy in 1941, with a preface by General Weygand, informs us: "Captain N'Tchoréré, a service officer well known among colonial troops and

On June 8th, near Amblény, the Germans had forced five French prisoners to precede them in their attack and four of them were killed by French bullets. On June 11th, in order to put an end to the resistance in the Varennes park, near Dormans, the Germans had threatened to make a column of French prisoners advance into the line of tracer bullets from one of their machine-guns. Then in order to mop up the neighbouring village, they ordered Lieutenant Chevalier of the 47th R.I. to tow one of their anti-tank guns and to precede their advance from house to house for twenty minutes. They had threatened to take reprisals against his men if he refused. How could one remain indifferent after one had witnessed scenes of this kind, even if they were exceptional?

Then in the Vosges there was the treachery of the Donon. The 43rd Army Corps, under the command of Général Lescanne, was entrenched in the Massif du Donon and went on fighting after Pétain had requested an armistice.\* Completely surrounded and outnumbered, shelled and dive-bombed, it had successfully beaten off all attacks. The signing of the Franco-German armistice

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decorated with the Légion d'Honneur, was in command, before the war, of the school for soldier's children at Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal. During the whole campaign in France he distinguished himself by his untiring energy and gave a magnificent example of courage and daring. On June 6th 1940, he fought like a lion in the sector of Airaines; he held the whole front north of the village and it was on him that the main onslaught of that colossal attack of massed tanks and planes fell. . . ."

In the *Mémorial de l'Empire* there is no mention of the assassination of Captain N'Tchoréré. It is a short step from the suppression of the truth to its actual falsification in the interests of the victor

\*It consisted of the remains of two Infantry Regiments, the 37th and 279th, a part of the Pioneer Corps 405 and 415, two almost entire Artillery regiments, one Cavalry and the other motorised, the 60th and the 68th, and finally of isolated units from the whole of Alsace who wished to fight on to the end. Many escaped prisoners and volunteers in de Gaulle's army were on the Donon, for example Hélié, who was shot by the Italians on July 14th 1943 while he was on a mission in Corsica, Polly, Lezines, Grillet, etc., etc.

made no difference to the resistance, and it was only on the afternoon of June 24th, when his supplies had given out, that Général Lescanne was at last obliged to sign a special treaty with the Commander of the German 24th Army Corps. By the terms of the agreement the surviving troops of the Donon, namely 23,000 men, were to be disarmed and provisionally interned. But they were to remain in their constituted units and to be sent back to unoccupied France as soon as railway communications had been restored. The 23,000 men, who were given the pompous title of 'honourable prisoners', were then taken to Strasbourg. There they remained until July 27th, on which date the German High Command declared the treaty of June 24th to be null and void and the 'honourable prisoners' were sent off to East Prussia.

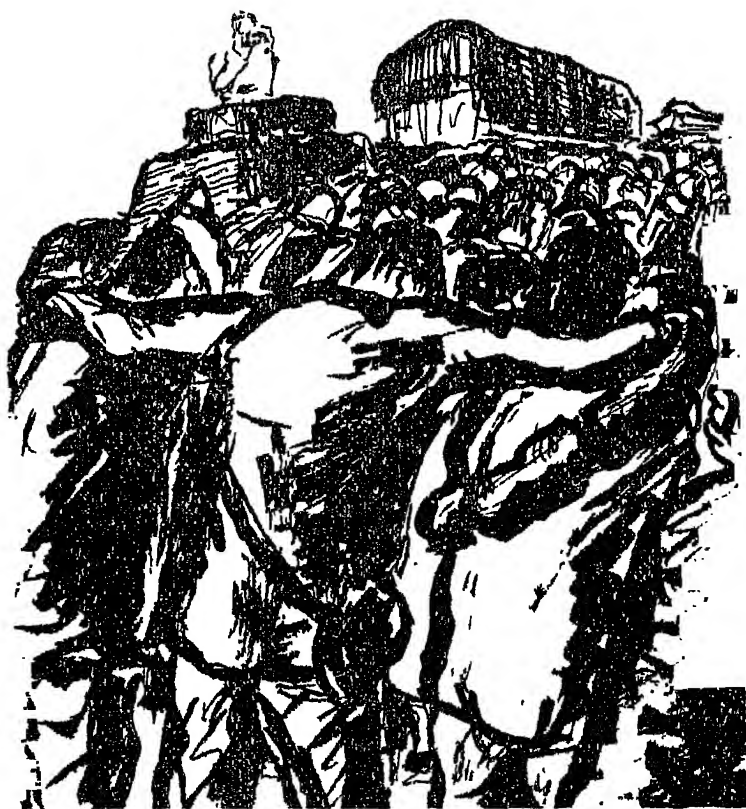
Vichy made no protest and expressed no sympathy.

The 23,000 men of the Donon believed for exactly thirty-five days in the validity of the armistice and the loyalty of the German High Command. Since then they have had more than thirty-five months in which to reproach themselves for their trust.

All the roads in the north of France and in Belgium showed the same sight. Through towns and villages, where sometimes only the walls of burnt-out houses were left standing, and along roads still lined with dead horses, machine-gunned cars and wrecked tanks, came two columns moving in opposite directions. On the one side, the weary file of the defeated, on the other, the triumphant procession of the conquerors. The conquering army was drunk with success, its lorries decorated with foliage and even, alas, with French helmets. The German soldiers kept taking snapshots of us, as though they wanted to squeeze every ounce of booty out of us, and to imprison us, or at least our image, for ever. In the meantime reinforcements kept arriving—an endless stream of lorries



WE ARE PRISONERS



THE ROAD TO CAPTIVITY

laden with contingents of fresh troops. Hour after hour the roads were filled with Panzers: tanks, self-propelled guns, light machine-gun tanks, motorised infantry lorries, postal cars, wireless cars, pontoon lorries—all kinds of military vehicles tore past, one close on the other, at a speed of forty miles an hour, making a horrible noise. If a lorry broke down, it was dumped into the ditch. The material was new and the units were at full strength. Everything went without a hitch, with astounding speed and efficiency: this war-machine, which had been tried out in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland, functioned as smoothly as if it had all been a large-scale manoeuvre.

On the other side of the road, we, the herd, were marching almost in the ditch. It so happened that I had to watch this herd file past for many hours on end: twenty-five or thirty thousand wretches on their way through Laon. It was a miserable day: the Germans were claiming that to-morrow they would capture Paris. A thin drizzle of rain soaked through everything. All one could hear was the thud of army boots dragging over the wet cobble-stones. . . . The sound of regular marching seemed very remote. In this mob hardly a man had a complete kit, and for want of a cap many had improvised headgear to protect them from the rain. It was a wretched and heart-rending sight. They had been soldiers, now they were mere robots—jostling one another as they walked. Their faces were blank, their eyes vacant and their bodies bent with weariness. The young men of France had lost everything—themselves first of all—and this defeat suddenly became, for them, universal shipwreck.

From the very first stages of the journey their exhaustion seemed to have reached the limits of physical endurance. But they had to go on, and each day meant an addition to the accumulated fatigue. We did twenty-five, thirty or forty miles a day; the columns stretched out over



a distance of six miles. At night, when we halted, we found that no arrangements had been made for sheltering us. Why should they bother about us, when all that mattered to the authorities in the Reich was the capture of Paris and the defeat of France? We had to sleep in the open air, huddled against one another. Sometimes we slept stretched out on the pavement, encircled by Bren-guns. Sometimes we would be penned up in the market square; we would sprawl on the ground like animals. At dawn, we would set out once more.

Sentries were posted at various stages on the road. Either they had received orders to be harsh, or they were afraid of being attacked. I don't know which, but, in any case, the only thing they cared about, almost every one of them, was to assert themselves by terrorising us: "Get on, Frenchmen. Get on!" If any soldier with bleeding feet happened to lag behind at the back of the column, he would be kicked about and beaten with a rifle butt. The slave driver in the German soldier was already coming out. Codron was wounded with a bayonet-thrust at Renaix because he could not keep up the pace. On May 30th, when Richer's convoy arrived at Maestricht, the prisoners were not walking fast enough for the sentries' liking, so the sentries jabbed them in the seat with bayonets and the poor men were forced to run, bleeding like bulls with banderillas stuck into them. Woe betide the man who lagged behind or looked as though he were stopping!

In Belgium an officer of the 27th Infantry Regiment of Dijon went to fetch some water. "What are you doing there?"—"Can't you see I'm getting water?" He was shot. . . . On June 8th, between Cambrai and Saint-Quentin, a man from Largerie's convoy asked if he could fetch water. He was shot. On August 6th, a formation halted at Saint-Mihiel: a soldier got the sentry's permission

to fetch water; hardly had he gone a few steps when the German took aim and shot him. On July 15th, on the Belgian frontier, an Englishman stooped down by the roadside to dig up a beetroot. He was shot and his body left on the spot. One might be on one's last legs, no matter, it was always: "Forward, Frenchmen!" On June 5th a soldier who had come on foot all the way from Sennes, sat down when he got to the Belgian frontier because he couldn't move another step. A Feldwebel drew out his revolver and shot him through the chest.

On the road to Bertrix, on June 6th, the man next to Harriscot, an Englishman, tried to escape. He was recaptured in the ditch, made to kneel down and was shot by an officer under the eyes of his comrades still filing past.

What made the ordeal most unbearable was less the brutality than the absence of any kind of official supplies of rations. Obviously it was difficult to organise supplies for a marching column like ourselves, but the Germans were capable of overcoming far greater difficulties than this when they chose. Besides, it wasn't as though there had been any food shortage. Holland had vast supplies of food which the Germans were delighted to plunder. In Belgium the villages were still heavily stocked with provisions left behind by our armies. Almost everywhere stray and wounded cattle were dying by the roadside. But the Germans never used these resources to feed their prisoners. Yet, one day, when a starving Senegalese saw a case of biscuits lying on the road from Berru to Epoye and rushed to pick it up, he was shot dead and his body was left lying across the road.

As a matter of fact it was only thanks to the food which the local inhabitants gave them that the French managed to last out at all. But of course all efforts on the part of civilians to feed the prisoners were systematically opposed by the German sentries. How many of us saw prisoners

killed without warning, murdered before our eyes, just for trying to seize a piece of bread that was held out to them, or bending down to pick up cigarettes. Those who tried to help them were brutally hit over the head and beaten off. At the beginning of September 1940, when the women of Rouen tried to bring food to the prisoners, the guards hit out at them with their rifle-bullets and beat them off. The mercenaries of the Thirty Years War came back to life in the victorious S.S. In a village between Macstricht and Linders, the Dutch had placed on either side of the road receptacles containing lemonade and grenadine for the prisoners. A platoon of German cyclists preceded the marching column by several dozen yards and these men were not satisfied until, with great shouts of triumph, they had upset every receptacle and smashed every bottle.

How grateful we are to those who, during those agonising days, bestowed a kind look on us, or waved to us. The journey through Holland was a revelation for many Frenchmen: on May 10th they had often met with coldness, but a month later, when they were defeated, they were welcomed as friends. But nowhere, I think, did our troops meet with a warmer welcome than in Alsace. No victorious army was ever welcomed home with more heart-felt demonstrations of love, and never, since 1870, had a whole French population suffered such mass despair. The Germans had forbidden all gatherings; they had also forbidden the feeding of prisoners. But at Colmar and Mulhouse the inhabitants surged into the streets, waving handkerchiefs and caps, yelling, screaming and sobbing. They kept shouting: "You'll come back to us! It's not all over yet! We're French! Long live France!" All along the column, food was handed or thrown to the prisoners. The guards were overpowered. Women broke through the cordons, children crawled under German

lorries to bring the French soldiers a packet of cigarettes or a mug of beer, and sometimes to kiss their hands. The Germans fired into the air, but who cared! The contents of every larder were emptied through the windows: rolls, sausages, tinned food rained down on us from one end of the town to the other. And all the time there were shouts of: "We're French! Come back to us soon! Long live France!"

## II

## OFLAG 2D

AT four o'clock in the morning, the train stopped. Outside, we could hear hoarse shouts and the tread of boots on the embankment. The vans were unlocked. In the first pale light of dawn, a thousand French officers suddenly found themselves in open country, in the depths of Pomerania. Dreary wastes of sand and fields of potatoes stretched out for miles all round them. "Do you see? Do you see?" shouted Dubreuil. We all instinctively looked in the same direction and were held spellbound by the most fantastic sight. Though at first we couldn't quite make out what it was, we guessed subconsciously. About 600 yards away, where the plain joined the pine-wood, a kind of opera stage-setting loomed up, floodlit, and looking like something between an African village and a fortified casino—a fantastic jumble of vast barbed wire enclosures, huts and sentry-posts. That's where we were being taken. There, at the edge of the wood, the stage stood ready for us, the actors. The drama to be performed there was our life, perhaps until the end of the war.

This was the cage in which Hitler was imprisoning us! How prophetic that French poster had been, the one showing the globe enclosed in barbed wire with the words

"The world as Hitler wants it!" The fortress round the camp was a huge network of barbed wire in two rows, about 7 feet high and 6 feet apart. The space between the two rows was filled with a vast tangle of springy wire, like thick underbrush with iron thorns. At every 200 feet or so there were sentry-posts perched on poles about 60 feet high, bristling with bren-guns and fitted up with searchlights. Inside the enclosure there was no black-out, and no night. From dusk till dawn the camp was illuminated as brilliantly as a circus ring. So for four years the German darkness has been lit by thirty or forty pools of light—the prison camps where prisoners pray for allied victory.

The Oflag was divided by barbed wire into four distinct compartments called 'Blocks'. Each Block consisted of anything from twelve to twenty huts, spaced out in two rows or formed into a circle round the communal latrine or *Abort*.

A little way off there was Block 5—as the cemetery was called.

The living-quarters were wooden huts where three layers of men slept in three-decker wooden bunks. When one wanted to go to bed, one would have to crawl into a bunk on all fours, like a dog getting into its kennel, unless one were lucky enough to have a top bunk in which case one only needed to hoist oneself up. When we were all in our bunks, anyone coming into the room in the middle of the night and seeing these layers of bodies, would have thought he had walked into a mortuary.

So much for the beds. As for food, the daily rations issued to us by the extremely economical authorities consisted of soup, a kind of dish-water with bits of turnips and sometimes mouldy potatoes floating in it, and about ten ounces of black bread seasoned with a spoonful of whale-fat or a little evil-smelling sausage.

How pitiful these human bodies looked: within a month everyone in the camp had grown very thin and suffered from flatulence. Many of us hardly had the courage to recommend each another the recipe for a 'bread sandwich', which was invented by Pierre Dac, a Montmartre singer; and there were some colonels who only got up in order to pick up cigarette ends.

Though some people thought that the French had grown soft through the easy life which they had led between the two wars, here, not only did they not allow the appalling conditions to master them, but the inventive genius of their race revealed itself in their daily life, with such force that the Germans were astounded.

The first miracle was the way the art of French cooking sprang up on foreign soil. There is nothing strange in this: during the misery and exhaustion of summer 1940, the arch-enemy of most of the prisoners was hunger. By reinventing national recipes, the officers felt that they were coming back into a part of their inheritance. Towards three o'clock in the afternoon, six or eight hundred fires would be lighted and then you would see smart cavalry officers squatting in front of the old tins which served as saucepans and puffing away at recalcitrant little fires.

At the same time, the battle against boredom was begun. There was the Oflag's university, the spoken 'News Flash', bridge competitions, and so forth. The most brilliant achievement of all was the theatre. The whole thing began with an impromptu play which was performed out-of-doors, on a stage made of four tables, one Sunday in July 1940. It was just a pathetic little collection of music-hall turns of the kind performed in market towns, at agricultural fairs. The thing which made it possible for theatricals to flourish in such an amazing way at Oflag 2D was that, at the entrance of

the camp, there was a large hall, with a good-sized stage and stage-lighting, and that we were allowed to order cardboard and paints and musical instruments from the town. Each 'Block' had its own arts committee, its orchestra, its choir, and its repertory company. Naturally, there was a great deal of competition between the blocks, and a rule was made that a new play must be produced every week. From then on, we made rapid progress.

During the early stages, the theatricals were run by the old hands who knew how to make something out of nothing. They popularised the technique of music-hall songs and spoken choruses, and, with Molière's comedies, even introduced classical drama into the Ollag.

Then stage designers were discovered, and we made such progress during the first three months that we did not mind investing three or four thousand marks in preparing a show that would only be performed three times. Some stage settings were brilliant achievements of intelligence, good taste, talent, and even of luxury. The stage managers of the Grossborn theatre threw themselves heart and soul into every aspect of stage-craft—décor, lighting, crowd-scenes—and they got remarkable results: sumptuous variety and cabaret shows, and finally a circus, got up by Captain Billotte. It was a huge success: after the band had struck up, clowns came tumbling on to the stage; then came athletes, jugglers and impersonators. The next item was Monsieur de Person's performing horses. Monsieur de Person appeared in a frock-coat, riding breeches and grey top-hat. Six pantomime horses with magnificent paste-board heads obediently performed the most elaborate steps. Next came a trainer, who displayed a very impressive menagerie. The show ended with a parade, which brought eighty performers on to the stage at once.

The final phase opened with the first modern play

which we produced: *La Margrave* by Alfred Savoir, in which a female character was successfully performed for the first time. From then on we no longer felt handicapped by any technical difficulties. We had rediscovered the rules of the theatre, and our imagination was not impaired by the conditions of prison life. Real art began to flourish behind the barbed wire of a Pomeranian prison camp. The theatre brought us together spiritually and gave us immense intellectual enjoyment, rather in the same way as the theatre united the audiences in ancient times in Greece. Naturally we did not consider Grossborn as one of the great cultural centres. It takes more than the asceticism of prison life to produce an Aristophanes and a Sophocles! Moreover our producers were perhaps much too inclined (at least at the beginning) to choose subjects which were easy to perform, rather than ones which corresponded to our frame of mind. I can only remember one occasion when a performance came close to expressing our own personal drama. It was when, on Christmas Eve 1940, the abbé Sochel, a marvellous stage-manager, produced a play by Henri Gheon, *Christmas on the Square*. In renewing the Mysteries of the Middle Ages the play resurrected the prestige of the old myths. The Christmas of defeat, the first Christmas of a captivity in a foreign land, an icy Christmas on which there shone no star of any hope! Whether we were believers or unbelievers, how deeply we felt our complete abandonment, our exile without refuge, made more tragic by our inactivity.

Whether the performances were serious or light, our theatre had become, almost without our realising it, a kind of dream factory. I am sure that no audience was ever so responsive to, nor so anxious to follow out, the author's suggestions. This was because in prison life there is only a restricted range of emotions and only a narrow



margin left over for them. Thus, far from purging the emotions, the theatre made up for their absence, recalled their existence and in fact nourished them in the heart of the spectator. While escape implied the flight of the individual to reality, the theatre brought the illusion of reality into the collective unreality of prison life. Our theatre, whose mission it was to satisfy such a collective need, gave some of us the feeling of a new community.

Thus in a few weeks, we had again built up a complex social life. Was this so very surprising? I don't know; the French have always been noted for their social habits. But our life was a diminished and sterile existence like that led by the shades of antiquity, who were condemned to spend endless colourless days, and who only revived a little when a mortal offered them a joint of meat and some fresh blood. What a monotonous life for those of us who were not interested in things of the mind, nor in trying to escape, nor in bridge!

In a prisoner's camp, life moulders and ferments. Sometimes a biologist takes a piece of tissue from a living organism and leaves it for years in a test-tube: each of us somehow resembled such a piece of tissue. Some who no longer had the strength to resist asphyxiation let themselves die. One could watch them growing weaker, shrivelling up, their personalities fading until all that remained of them was a shadow, a memory.

However, everyone reacted differently according to his temperament. For many, the main problem was how to overcome boredom and how to blind themselves to their misery. They resigned themselves to the defeat and were only concerned with killing time. Besides, the patience of the first months was also partly due to the fact that the prisoners believed in the myth of an early repatriation, and the Germans did everything to encourage this belief.

And yet, side by side with those who were numbed mentally before dying physically, it was already possible to see what was intensely alive behind the barbed wire. The apathy of some of the prisoners sickened me, at the time, but now, when I look back, the camp strikes me as a kind of refinery. I realise to-day how responsible many of us felt all along, how deeply responsible for the future of France. Already some men were determined not only to keep level-headed (most were only too level-headed!), but to keep on thinking and forming judgments in spite of being behind barbed wire. Although some confirmed intellectuals were perhaps almost too much inclined to seek refuge in their minds ("I am a contemplater!" R—— used to say), I do not think that such strenuous efforts have ever before been made to save, in France's heritage, freedom of thought. Let no one be surprised if, when France is liberated, it is the prisoners who bring back the most fruitful thoughts. Some men had already determined to fight the Germans secretly, like the monitor of Block II who was uncharitably nicknamed 'the Cobra'. "There's a man who will know how to get himself repatriated," sneered the uninitiated. 'The Cobra' let them talk. Why should they be told that Lieutenant Bozel was busy deceiving Germans, until he got the chance to slip discreetly away!

Almost without realising it, the young men had started their revolt. Indignation, hatred, bitterness, sarcasm, despair and irony, these feelings united young men from every possible political background who did not shrink from facing up to their misery, who cherished Péguy for his poverty and not for his glory, who could maintain that it was not an honour to be a prisoner, and who did not know what it was to feel defeated, although they knew only too well what defeat meant for France. Unknown brothers in shackles, should I give your names? They are

too many . . . and I should betray you were I to mention only a few. . . .

A winter evening: a heavy lid of snow weighs on the huts. In the stove, the remains of half a hundredweight of coal allowed weekly per room is just burning away. Three prisoners are leaning over a table. On other evenings they have discussed the 'Canal des deux mers',\* justice, Chartres and surrealism. One of them is reading aloud to the others. His voice is low, because it is heart-felt and also because he doesn't want the bridge players at the other end of the room to hear him:

"Ce soir, onze novembre mil neuf cent quarante. . . ."

This took place three years ago, but it could be happening to-night:

Quand la première étoile a brillé sur la ville,  
 Nous nous sommes levés, ce soir, de notre table,  
 Comme faisaient les Juifs, jadis, le soir de Pâques.  
 (Il est de ces piétés venues des profondeurs!)  
 Et, pareils aux enfants du peuple des Pasteurs  
 Conservant dans les temps à jamais la mémoire  
 De leur grande aventure, ainsi, ce soir, sans pain,  
 Sans agneau à rôtir, sans sac de pèlerin,  
 Nous nous sommes levés pour songer à ta gloire,  
 Et certains ont pleuré en comptant tes victoires:  
 Oh! France terrassée, nous te crions merci  
 A l'heure du tourment d'être en ton allégeance  
 Et de pouvoir porter le poids de ton souci. . . .†

\*Canal which joins the Mediterranean sea to the Atlantic.

†This evening, November the eleventh nineteen forty-one,  
 When the first star shone on the town,  
 We got up, this evening, from our table  
 As the Jews did, in olden days, on the eve of Passover  
 (Ah! the pity of things profoundly sad)  
 And like the children of the Pastoral peoples  
 For ever preserving the memory

A sarcastic voice interrupts the poem.

"We haven't learnt to hate enough."

"It's not that we haven't good cause to," replies one of the other men.

"Every day I get more and more fed up," sighs a third voice.

The man goes on reading:

"... Faudrait-il oublier  
Quand ce tendre sourire  
Dans la douleur expire?

Que nous le chérissons  
Ton beau regard qui cille,  
France qui a pour nom  
Un nom de jeune fille!"\*

In a hut in Pomerania or in East Prussia, a prisoner recites his poem of obstinate hope, a poem which he has repeated time and time again during these three years, and which will only be published, if he has not burnt it by then, when liberation comes.

"Nous suivons notre route  
Et guidons notre joug

---

Of their great adventure, so this evening, without bread,  
We got up to think of your glory.  
And some wept when they counted your victories:  
O prostrate France, we thank you  
At this hour of our torment, that we bear allegiance to you  
And that we are able to bear the weight of your misery. . .

\*"Should we forget  
When your tender smile  
Expires in sorrow?

How we cherish  
Your beautiful closed eyes,  
France—you who bear  
A maiden's name!"

Dans le silence uni,  
 Nous tous, liés à la terre,  
 Poussés d'âmes en gerbe,  
*Les Architectes du Parvis. . . .*\*

## III

## THE PRISONERS ARE MERCILESS

"**F**IFE APREAST!" ordered the Hauptmann on day-duty.

"Fife apreast!" echoed the Feldwebels.

"Fife apreast!" in Pomeranian French meant five abreast.

The prisoners lined up with a great clatter. Then, as was the daily custom, the Oberfeldwebel read out the roll-call to the Hauptmann.

At that moment, Colonel Gerhardt appeared. The armistice had been signed ten days ago, and the camp had only yesterday got its full complement of men. The camp commandant had come to make the acquaintance of his new charges. He saluted, adjusted his glasses, drew a piece of paper out of his pocket and began to read an address of welcome:

"French officers!" he said with a strong German accent, "you have fought bravely. You have suffered a colossal defeat, owing to the courage of our soldiers, who are heroes, to the brilliant strategy of the Germans and to the genius of our Führer, Adolf Hitler."

\*"We follow our road  
 And guide our yoke  
 In perfect silence,  
 All of us, bound to the soil,  
 Our united souls aspiring.  
 We, the *Builders of the Temples. . . .*"

He paused. We wondered if it was to find his words or because he hoped for a sign of sympathy from his audience. After an icy silence, he continued:

"Play games, sirs. Learn foreign languages: study German. You will soon go home and you will find it useful. I hope that we shall get on well. By the way, I have given orders that anyone who goes within less than three yards of the barbed wire will be shot; so it is useless to try to escape. French officers, I salute you!"

What a cordial welcome! Obviously the German handshake through barbed wire was not going to prove a very effective means of pacifying us.

Actually our daily life was more or less free from conflicts, as the German officers' conduct was 'militarily' correct and as relations with them were maintained solely through the French 'Staff' of each Block. Nevertheless a peculiar ill-luck caused all the German attempts to secure our collaboration to fail miserably.

Colonel Gerhardt, a senile old Prussian, was a caricature, and like every good caricature, a symbol. He tried to deceive us but he never knew how to. Moreover his clumsiness and his sense of humour were lamentable. Delousing and hair-cutting which could have passed for public health measures, were only imposed on disciplined huts and if the colonel were out-of-sorts. In spite of the fact that we had become used to discomfort we could not do without fuel. The Germans were generous enough (and how they rubbed in their generosity!) to give us pine-stumps over and above the official weekly ration of half a hundredweight of coal per room during the winter months. These pine-stumps were still in the ground. "You have only to dig them up, gentlemen!" So we had to organise a daily fatigue for digging up the pine-stumps, and carrying them back to the camp ourselves under the mocking eyes of German sentries. Colonels too had to lug

great tree-stumps on their shoulders! Colonel Gerhardt was delighted: the clearing of Grossborn proceeded at a tremendous speed, without costing the Reich a pfennig.

It was over the wireless 'incident' that Colonel Gerhardt was shown up in the most ridiculous light.

One day in September 1940, the wireless in Block 3 canteen suddenly broke down. A German said that he had seen one of us fooling about with the loud-speaker. Colonel Gerhardt immediately ordered the canteen to be closed down, and told the senior French officer, Colonel Gruyer, that the man responsible for this piece of 'sabotage' would have to give himself up before eight o'clock on the following morning, failing which, grave measures would be taken. We were told that, when the time limit was up, two of us would be detained every half-hour until the culprit came forward. Colonel Gruyer replied saying that if measures were to be taken against anyone, they should be taken against himself, as he was the spokesman of the Block. Twenty-four hours passed: we waited in vain for the threatened detentions. Then Colonel Gerhardt had the following announcement read to us: "As I am impressed by Colonel Gruyer's noble offer, I shall refrain from taking measures this time, and I shall do no more than impose a collective fine of 5,000 marks on the 1,500 officers of Block 3." After we had paid the fine, the real story leaked out. We learnt that a Feldwebel of the camp had gone on leave the week before and had made off with the contents of the Kommandantur's till which, through some extraordinary coincidence, had contained precisely 5,000 marks!

The wireless incident was harmless compared with the enormous scandal of the Schmidt affair.

The German High Command had authorised the opening of Canteens in the Oflag. A man called Schmidt got the Party to appoint him canteen manager in Block 3.



COOKING TIME AT THE OFLAG





VISIT TO THE INFIRMARY

He was short, stocky and vulgar. He wore pretentious linen suits and looked like a cheap version of Von Papen. He was in turn insolent and boring, and always false. He had one great ambition: he had begun his career as a dishwasher in Paris, at the Grand Hotel. There he had been given the sack and had sworn that he would go back as a master or, to be exact, a proprietor. The war gave him his chance to set out on his 'conquest of Paris'.

Towards July 1st, 1940, Old Man Schmidt took possession of his canteen, rolled up his sleeves and began to supply us with a kind of sweet beer which we had to put up with. To tell the truth, his family played no part in supporting his ambitions. Old Mrs Schmidt was a full-bosomed slut, always busy over her kitchen range and who had never understood her husband. The product of this happy union was a sly and arrogant youth; but Schmidt had brains for the three of them. He hustled his family about, scolded his son and heir, slapped his wife across the face amid a clatter of saucepans, and worked away assiduously at piling up his fortune.

From the room behind the canteen where he set up headquarters, he tried to establish a despotic rule over Block 3. He decided the business hours, fixed prices arbitrarily, turned people away when they had been queuing up for hours in the hopes of a drink, and started swindling us. He had beaters who managed to track down the most inveterate smokers and entice them to steal off at nightfall to the back-door of the canteen; they crept there, scratched at the door and slipped in furtively like Town-Hall clerks sneaking off to a brothel. Schmidt would grumble at them and, after a while, he would let himself be persuaded to sell them a packet of cigarettes — "his own packet" he said, as a special favour to a friend — for ten marks. . . .

So far this was business on a small scale, as our means

were restricted. But on July 20th, we learnt that we were to receive regularly half our salary; in other words 150,000 camp marks would be paid monthly to Block 3 alone. Schmidt was not one to miss an opportunity. He set to work. Eight days later, he had piled up on his counters every possible bit of rubbish from all the ironmongers, grocers, and confectioners' shops in Pomerania. Schmidt bought up anything and everything, however shop-soiled or battered, that he could lay his hands on: rosaries, coloured post-cards, shoe polish, card games of forty-eight cards, badly enamelled saucepans, tooth-brushes which had been in the shop windows for months—and resold them at enormous profits. On our arrival at the camp, our knives and razors, if we had managed to keep them up till then, were confiscated. Schmidt sold them back to us at two hundred francs apiece. He turned everything into money, and made a percentage on watch-mending and on the sale of newspapers. Moreover, as money cost us nothing, marks poured in and the canteen did a roaring trade.

Then Schmidt hit upon a new idea. He saw that the best way to fleece us was to supply us with food. Towards the middle of August he bought up a stock of potatoes which had been abandoned as unfit for consumption and got permission to resell it to us. A committee of French officers bought it up from him at a high price. Schmidt had pulled off a masterly deal.

He did not stop at this. Before long new provisions began to arrive almost every day. We saw lorry-loads of Polish cucumbers, Bulgarian tomatoes, Macedonian currants, being unloaded in front of the canteen. Tins of jam were put on sale at one hundred marks each. Even supplies of unskimmed milk became regular. It was a golden age for the cooks! By September 1940, his business proceeds totalled 25,000 marks at least. He returned

10,000 marks to the Nazi Party, and his profits, goodness knows how, he sent to Switzerland!

When his activities had reached this stage in their development, Schmidt found an unexpected rival in the camp itself: old Frau Krasemann, who ran the canteen in Block 2. Blue-aproned Messalina, assisted by two nieces whom she lent or hired out to all the German non-commissioned officers at the camp, old Frau Krasemann had followed in Schmidt's footsteps and was receiving vast and regular contributions from Block 2. The two potentates decided to go into partnership. The first successful deal which they brought off was to secure a vast supply of soap. They managed to provide the 6,000 French prisoners with double the German civilian soap ration at only 20 per cent more than the retail price. The next transaction was even more successful. A potted-meat factory, which was working for the German authorities, delivered 60,000 tins at 1 mark 25, or 2 marks each, according to the size, and the partners re-sold them to us at 2 marks and 3 marks 50, respectively. The net profits from this transaction came to 60,000 marks, in other words about twelve hundred thousand francs (equal £2,000).

This time, the authorities became suspicious of the camp. "What!" said Schmidt indignantly, "they suspect me, a Member of the Party! They accuse me, an honest tradesman, of illicit profits! Why not examine the accounts of the French officers' Committees?" Both the Gestapo and Colonel Gerhardt, an honest soldier, took Schmidt's word because he was a German. They asked the officers' committees to show their book-keeping accounts. Luckily, one of the committees had kept accounts down to the nearest penny. The books were examined and found to be in order. This completely turned the tables on Schmidt, who was arrested. The real story leaked out: in order to run his business, Schmidt had

bribed officials on a large scale. Everyone involved was in turn arrested, Frau Schmidt, old Frau Krasemann and their accomplices. By the end of the year, we learnt that Schmidt had hanged himself in his cell, and that Frau Krasemann had been beheaded with an axe.

All these things were obviously not of a nature to encourage our collaboration. When we arrived at the Oflag at the end of June 1940 we were weighed down by the catastrophe of France, and moreover we felt that we had been monstrously trapped and submitted to the most exasperating form of discipline that could ever be imposed on a human being. All this was perfectly true, but we were French, after all, and by the end of the second month we had become a nightmare to Colonel Gerhardt and a terror to his sentries.

In France, ridicule kills; in Germany it disarms. The sentries, whose least remark we turned to ridicule, were soon only at ease when we were safely in bed and they were making their rounds with police dogs to root out some hypothetical escaping prisoner. For these sentries we Frenchmen were an enigma. They could never understand that if we were ordered to put the lights out at eleven p.m., it was sufficient reason for us to keep them on till eleven-thirty p.m. Every night there was the same clownish scene. At eleven o'clock the sentries would bang at our windows shouting: "Licht aus! Licht aus!" We would shout back: "Naked! at the 'Abort'." After the third or fourth order a German would threaten to shoot at the window. We would switch off the lights. The sentries would pass on to some other hut to shout their "Licht aus!" Then one of the huts would turn up its lights again. . . .

The sentries feared the Frenchmen's affability no less than their mockery. One evening a sentry entered a room shouting the usual "Licht aus!" He was offered a drink,

which he accepted with delighted "Ja, ja". We made merry and put down glass after glass of wine. At dawn a German patrol ran into a bundle lying across the path. It was the sentry, dead drunk, rolled up in a blanket with his gun planted into the ground beside him. . . .

Colonel Gerhardt was beside himself with indignation at such behaviour. Like the tyrant of the last century, he too had 6,000 subjects, not counting the subjects of complaint. If he issued an order, we made fun of it. If he told us not to urinate against the huts, the very next night his own hut would be amply urinated on. If he had the officers of Block 4 cropped, "Sir," Colonel Ardouin-Dumazet said to him, "I warn you that when it is your turn to be a prisoner in France, it will not only be your head that I shall have shaved!"

One day Colonel Gerhardt appeared at roll-call. "Gentlemen, you must hand over all your French money to the German authorities. You have saved some and hidden it. I know that you have at least two hundred thousand francs!" He waited. Not a penny was handed over. But when the German Government gave the prisoners permission to send home their French money, we produced from nowhere the sum of four million francs.

"French officers," he said, at the next roll-call, "you have too much imagination!"

Three days later several thousand planks which had been stacked up in the out-houses of the camp disappeared surreptitiously. Again Colonel Gerhardt harangued us, this time furiously: "Gentlemen, you wish to anger me," and his voice trembled with rage, "but you will not succeed, no, you will not succeed." Then, in order to prove his composure, he ordered Lieutenant Aupetit to be sent into detention for five days because he had written home to France: "My teeth are going bad, no doubt because of camp food." The reason given for

the punishment was: "Insult to the German Reich."

Under such circumstances collaboration was out of the question. In this camp, where all the various leanings, interests and factions of France were represented, from Monsieur Peyrymhoff of the 'deux cents familles'\* to Monsieur Rosenfeld of the 'Populaire', not only did I never hear the word collaboration pronounced, but even after seven or eight months of imprisonment no one so much as suspected that such a thing existed in France. I have been told since then collaborationists have appeared in nearly all the Oflags. Up to the eve of the attack on Russia they had still not declared themselves.† In fact not one of the few prisoners liberated from Oflag 2D who have since become collaborationists would have dared speak a word in favour of National Socialism while still in Germany. Fascist sympathisers like J. P. Maxence, or the Doriotist Lanoux, were always very guarded in their remarks. Darquier de Pellepoix‡ spent some weeks in Oflag 2D before obtaining his scandalous repatriation through his connections with Scapini and Abetz. While he was there he was very careful to avoid expressing his pro-Hitlerism, even in private. He would have been beaten up. His anti-semitism was already frowned upon. At the close of his first lecture he was taken up, and after turning pale and stammering innumerable apologies he withdrew hastily amid a titter of laughter. It was only when he was back in Paris that he showed his cynicism again. He had borrowed considerable sums from his room-mates, promising in return to send them compasses and civilian clothing to facilitate their escape. All he

\*The two hundred leading families in France.

†Since the reactions of prisoners were always six months or a year behind reactions in France, it is possible that collaboration only began in the Oflags when French collaborationists were ceasing to believe in it.

‡Whom Vichy has since appointed High Commissioner for Jewish Affairs.

did was to write to them advising them to be prudent.

Our long ignorance of the existence of collaboration largely explains why the Oflags remained loyal to Maréchal Pétain for such a length of time. By this I do not mean that the loyalty was justified. For the many men who maintained that "this was not our war", who thought the war was lost because the infallible Mussolini had thought so, and who thought they were through with it when they heard Radio-Stuttgart announce the armistice—for these men Pétain undoubtedly signified above all peace, or in their selfish words: "For goodness sake let's have peace!" Our pseudo-nationalists, more or less consciously inspired by Maurras, had refused to wage an ideological war. Their 'realism' made them incapable of attributing to others motives which were not also dictated by this self-same *imbécile* realism and consequently they feared nothing so much as an understanding between England and Germany at the expense of France. If one reminded them that the Armistice had been a perjury for France, and that Montoire\* was a Franco-German arrangement at the expense of England, they excused the Armistice of Mers-el-Kebir and Montoire by the desire to cash in on the dividends of the Armistice. However, the fact remains that nowhere was there so much belief in Pétain's will to resist as in the Oflags, and nowhere else were so many people taken in by the myth of a secret pact between Pétain and de Gaulle. If anyone in an Oflag in 1940 had predicted that Tunisia would be given up to the enemy without fight, and that in Syria, at Algiers and at Casablanca, the order would be given to resist the Allies, there would have been a general uproar. The majority of the prisoners believed their convictions were justified when, in Spring 1941, they heard from Vichy

\*Montoire is a small town where the first meeting between Pétain and Hitler took place after the Armistice in October 1940.



that Hitler had demanded the Toulon fleet and that the Maréchal and the Admiral had refused to deliver it. Hitler, added the rumour, had then sent a Panzer Division across the line of demarcation. The old defender of Verdun had not yielded, and Hitler had been obliged (!) to withdraw his tanks into occupied France, while the French fleet had set out for an unknown destination, in all probability Gibraltar. . . .

As a matter of fact Pétain's patriotism was so completely taken for granted that when disagreements arose they were very similar to the dissensions in French internal politics. Apart from the prisoners whose only preoccupation was trying to survive, the camp was divided between those for and those against the National Revolution. Those who were for it were often in favour of monarchism, the only means, in their opinion, of reconciling authority with 'traditional liberties', invoking the national interest, as though France's mission and interest had not been, throughout the centuries, precisely to refuse to have recourse to this argument of national interest. Some even went so far as to maintain that the defeat would be better for France than victory, if it were to bring about a 'New Order' and keep the workers quiet. Those who were against the National Revolution, on the other hand, actually maintained that the Vichy Government was not at all sorry to have two million Frenchmen imprisoned in Germany, as it saved them the trouble of having to open concentration camps in France in order to make the mass of the people swallow their National Revolution.

The different ways in which the Oflag reacted to changes among politicians in France were no less symptomatic than its Pétainist illusions. Imprisoned in the Oflags, the French bourgeoisie was all the more helpless before the

frauds committed in the name of patriotism by politicians who, it thought, represented that very bourgeoisie, because it imagined that it had a monopoly of patriotism. Its cult of Poincaré was in its opinion a guarantee of this. Thus, less distrustful or less intransigent than the Stalag prisoners, its satisfied sense of honour increasing its respect for established authority, it was beyond this bourgeoisie to conceive that a French politician, however discredited, could be capable of a qualified act of treason. Moreover the concept of treason which, as history has taught us, is relative and subject to periodic revision, appeared in the last three-quarters of a century of capitalist democracy to have become limited to paid activity in the enemy's service. Thus the bourgeois France of 1940 could produce a Ferdonnet; in all good faith it believed itself incapable of producing traitors on the grand scale. Consequently, for many officers of perfectly good faith, it was not hard to attribute a patriotic significance to all the good patchings-up of the Vichy Government; they did not find it difficult to tolerate Laval as the go-between who would be able, either to trick Hitler or to rebuild Franco-Italian friendship at Germany's expense, to deplore the Palace revolution of December 13th 1940, as no less than a catastrophe by which France was handed over to the "man who sent the telegram to Hitler", to welcome the advent of Darlan, or even to pin their hopes to Déat as a kind of socialist Gambetta. It was one of these utopians who lent me the hundred marks necessary for my escape.

As long as the prisoners centred their hopes in the myth of repatriation and Vichy was able to gain credence for the legend of resistance through Pétain,\* Colonel Gerhardt should have had no serious cause for anxiety. Nevertheless the aggressiveness of the French was not confined

\*"One can only lean on what resists"—H. Scapini was at that time circulating (no doubt with the approval of the Germans).

to pranks. From the very beginning of our imprisonment, several more serious demonstrations of resistance disturbed law and order at the Oflag.

The first of these was a lecture by Captain Billotte. A graduate of the École de Guerre, a Commanding officer of a Company of heavy tanks during the battle of France, decorated with the Légion d'Honneur for having destroyed ten German tanks, Captain Billotte was one of the personalities of his Block. Towards August 15th 1940 he submitted, for approval by the Kommandatur, an apparently harmless subject for a lecture, "Some Tactical Problems". Colonel Gerhardt passed it. The tactical problem which Captain Billotte discussed was the following: "Why, under present conditions, a forced landing on England is impossible." This seemed all the more inopportune to Colonel Gerhardt because he had thought that we were reduced to pinning our hopes to the prophecies of Nostradamus; and with that monstrous intolerance which imposes *auto-da-fés* on twentieth century Europe and which cannot admit that the Universe should not think along Nazi lines, the Colonel deprived Captain Billotte of his mail and forbade him to give any more lectures. Captain Billotte retorted by giving, a few days later, a private talk in the course of which he dealt with exactly the same 'tactical problems', and at which four hundred officers were present.

The next demonstration was the celebration of the Saint-Austerlitz. One of the huts in the camp was specially decorated for the occasion. Little paper cassowaries were pinned on to the walls, and the astounding thing was that there was a French flag. At the door a 'Bazar', in genuine full dress, wearing a shako and white gloves, welcomed the guests. "There were two hundred of us in our Block alone", writes Boisseu in his diary. "The atmosphere was serious and sad. Each man recalled

similar ceremonies which had taken place before, in France. But since the last few days there was confidence in our eyes. The news was better: France is recovering, France is resisting, the English are getting their blood up, the R.A.F. raids on Stettin and the Rhineland are beginning to cause anxiety in Germany, the Italians are being defeated in Macedonia, hope is reborn, maps of Cyrenaica cover the walls—with little flags marking the advance of the British forces—perhaps something will happen in North Africa, perhaps one day we shall be able to take up arms again. Ah! what a great day that will be! How often one hears this remark: 'Rather ten years here and that the Hun should be beaten!'"

The third sign of French insubordination, the most painful for Colonel Gerhardt, was the first escapes. The season began on August 15th 1940 with the daring escape of Acting Second Lieutenant Rosere. He failed through ill-luck and was recaptured, dying with hunger, near Halle. But the signal had been given. Soon after this at a meeting of old Saint-Cyriens of his Block, Captain Billotte made the following appeal: "Gentlemen, the French regulation orders every prisoner of war to use every means at his disposal to escape from the enemy's hands: it is every service officer's duty to escape and take up the fight again."

Before long we learnt, through the German newspapers, of the death of Colonel d'Ornano, killed with his rifle in his hand before Mourzouk. Then we heard of Général Leclerc's heroic attack on Koufra. So Frenchmen were still fighting! It was at this time that several of us made up our minds to escape. "If we're still here on March the 15th, we're cowards", said Boissieu to his friend B—, and when he recalls this episode he adds: "If on March the 15th we had still been at the Oflag, I really couldn't have met his eyes without being forced to

think: 'We're cowards! My God! what a relief to have escaped in time!'

From then on the attempts at escaping became more numerous. Public opinion was beginning to change. Rosere's escape had almost caused disapproval. There had been people who grumbled: "To go and do that to us! We shall get into more trouble because of that sucker!" Another attempt failed in October-November, amid almost general indifference, and on this occasion our spokesman, Colonel Andrei, openly expressed his disapproval of escapes.

Six months later the failure of the first ten attempts had in no way discouraged the thirst for freedom—far from it. In fact, the problem of how to escape became sufficiently serious to necessitate the founding of a syndicate for escapes, in order to fix dates of departure. Finally, in February 1941, the team Billotte-Person-Bozel escaped successfully, followed in March by the Boissieu team.

For a long time Colonel Gerhardt brooded over his revenge. He brooded over it for almost a year. In Spring 1942, two officers' teams dug a tunnel through which they planned to escape at a few hours' interval. The first team set out successfully. Unfortunately a German patrol discovered the exit of the tunnel almost immediately, and gave the alarm to the Colonel. When Lieutenant Rabin, the leader of the second team, was crawling out of the tunnel into freedom, a searchlight was turned on him and a shower of Bren-gun bullets pierced his head and chest. His two comrades were behind him in the tunnel. They were killed by hand grenades.

## IV

## AT THE STALAG

AT the end of 1940, it was still possible for an officer prisoner of war, in a moment of optimism, to compare himself to the traveller of old, caught by an avalanche and forced to spend the winter in a remote châlet, with his tobacco-pouch and a few good books. He had not yet lost all his worldly goods and his poverty was that of a rich man. But at a Stalag\* it was impossible to have any illusions. It was like one of those slum doss-houses which most of us had only seen in films.

A man walks through the fog, dragging his feet. He pushes open a door and he's in a hovel. The inmates don't notice him and he doesn't notice them. He sits down on an old packing-case, remaining absolutely quiet for a minute and staring at a hole in his trousers. Then still staring, he begins to scratch his arm-pits. I know this man and thousands like him. . . . A little while ago they were peasants in the fields and vineyards of France.

A voice sighs: "When shall we be able to sleep in a real bed with a real woman?" Who is speaking? It's not a down-and-out, it's Palatan, Palatan who used to spend his week-ends at Saint-Tropez. He's not really aware that he has sunk lower than any wrtch he could have pre-

\*The Stalag (short for Stammlager) is the administrative centre to which privates and non-commissioned officers are attached. Roughly only about 10 per cent of the total complement of prisoners remain at the Stalag: the French camp employees (interpreters, secretaries, post office officials, medical orderlies, cooks, tailors), acting-second lieutenants and non-commissioned officers (who are theoretically exempt from work owing to their rank), the sick, prisoners in transit between two posts, prisoners under detention and recalcitrant prisoners. All the others are sent into Kommandos. The Stalags with which we are familiar, 1A and 1B, situated respectively at Stablaak and Hohenstein (East Prussia), and 2B at Hammerstein (Pomerania), had a total of about 40,000 prisoners attached to them. The number of men present at the camp varied between 2,500 and 6,000.

viously imagined. The beggars one used to see in the old days, sitting on a bench in a square, unwrapping a hunk of bread from a newspaper and pulling out a bottle of red wine, were far better off than us. *But we didn't realise this*, at least not at first. Because we weren't in the mood for comparisons, especially not gloomy ones, and when we had day-dreams it was always to escape from anything which reminded us of the present.

Little by little we grew accustomed to this half-dead life in the dim glow of night-lights. We went on living. We didn't even go mad: just as the eye adapts itself to darkness after sunlight, so we adapted ourselves to our circumstances. This may have been a simple defence mechanism, or a rarer form of the instinct for self-preservation. At all events it saved us from despair.\*

The Stalag is the embodiment of useless oppression and organised inhumanity. As soon as you set foot inside a Stalag you feel that you are on the point of losing your dignity as a human being. Not only have you lost your freedom as a man, but you are about to lose your manhood itself and become just an animal. The human herd which, in June 1940, we saw being driven along the roads of Belgium and Holland, has now been rounded up at the Stalag, registered and organised. But it remains a herd, by Hitler's will. Do you remember this grim description:

"Et l'on voit certains animaux farouches répandus par la campagne, noirs, livides et tout tâchés de soleil; ils ont comme une voix articulée et, quand ils se lèvent sur leurs pieds, ils montrent une face humaine: et en effet, ils sont des hommes."<sup>†</sup>

\*I wish to make it quite clear that adaptability does not mean placidity. The prisoners are not thick-skinned.

<sup>†</sup>"... And one sees certain wild animals scattered about the countryside. They are black, livid and sun-blotched; the sounds they make are almost articulate; when they get up on their feet, their faces look human; and, strangely enough, they are, in fact, human beings."

It applies again to-day, after three hundred years. The modicum of physical freedom granted to officers is denied the simple soldiers. In the Stalag you are ruled by the word *Verboten*. It confronts you, looming up on all sides, crushes you and dominates every minute of your life. What can you do? Seek solitude? Sit down on the ground in the sun? Think in silence? No, that's impossible. Well, what *can* you do when everything is impossible, forbidden, *verboten*? Even the huts aren't a refuge from the Germans. From six in the morning till six at night, sentries, or Feldwebels, come bursting in every half-hour for roll-calls, or to search the hut, or to check up on the blankets, or to rout you out for fatigue duties or exercise. You have to be on your guard the whole time against the 'Rausings', and if Jerry comes in full strength, the only thing you can do is to jump through the windows and make a dash to hide in the infirmary, the camp stores, or even the *Abort*.

At Stalag 2B, the living-huts have no electricity. When night falls, which in winter is as early as four in the afternoon, the huts are plunged into semi-darkness. A thick and icy gloom, worse than any London fog, falls from the now invisible ceiling and hangs round the room. Six parallel rows of bunks stretch away into the darkness. One after the other, smelly little oil lamps are lighted. They are made out of old tins and shoe-laces burning in fat saved from meals. These poor little lamps glimmering in the dark are more precious than Aladdin's lamp. For these appalling dens are inhabited. They are packed out, in fact, and seethe like a nest of snakes. There are two hundred men there, standing about, lying down, squatting and sprawling all over the room. Most of them are perched up in the bunks and twisted into weird shapes. They look like monkeys in uniform, and, with the shadows playing over them, their faces seem alternately grinning and cadaverous. There is an uninterrupted buzz of noise and activity.



They are busy scraping their tin bowls, crunching biscuits, scratching for flies, reading, talking, playing bridge, thinking about something or thinking of nothing.

Thus minutes pass, hours, years. . . .

"Le temps s'en va, le temps s'en va, ma Dame!

—Las! Le temps, non! Mais, nous, nous en allons. . . ."

It didn't seem like time wasted, but like time stolen from us, time murdered. Most of us were more helpless before its flight than in the face of death itself.

"What have you been doing this morning?"

"Nothing, just hanging around."

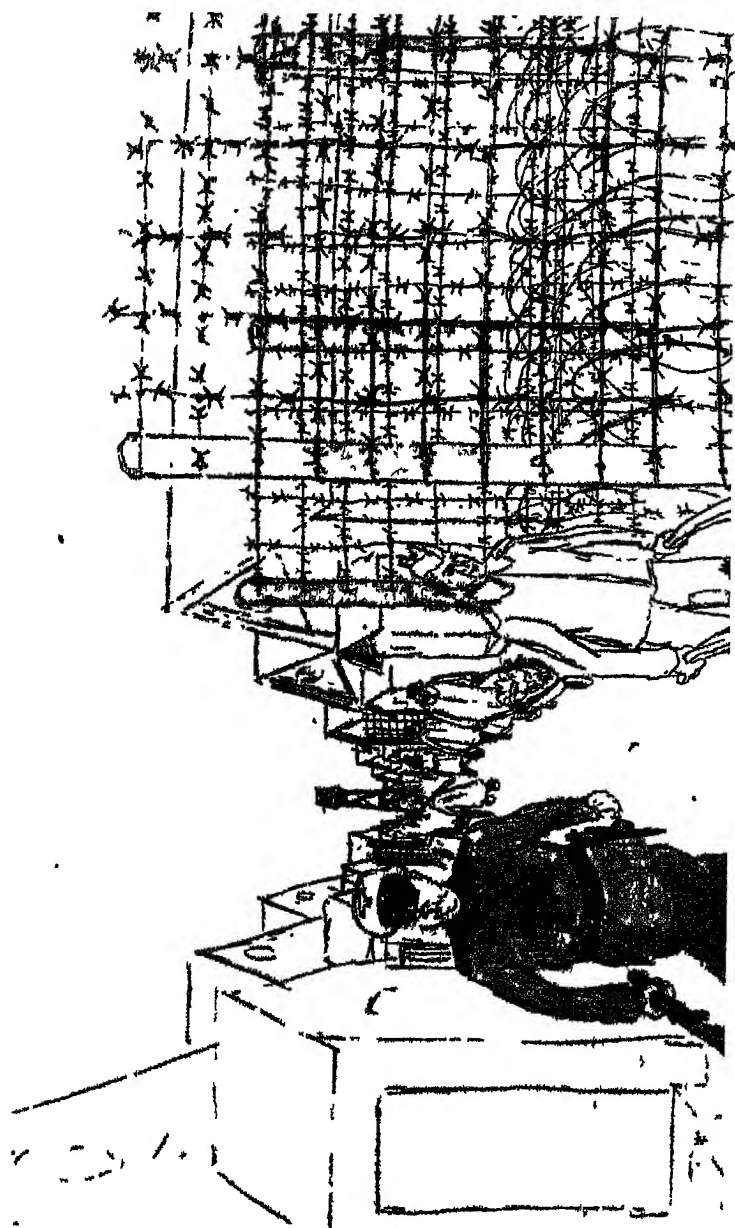
"Hanging around" meant running about inside barbed-wire and trying to get away from oneself.

The monotony was only broken on Sundays. In the morning a Sung Mass was celebrated in the large hall at the Kartci. As soon as Mass was over a stage was improvised, with boards and blankets, for the silhouette show which would be given in the afternoon. A team of experts was exempted from fatigue duties and Kommando work, and spent the whole week, under the supervision of the stage director from the Casino de Paris, busily drawing and cutting out paper chorus-girls with feathers and flounces. On Sundays these silhouette chorus-girls would be made to perform *The Land of Smiles* against pink and blue backgrounds. The Commandant had allowed the founding of an orchestra which accompanied the fairy ballet. As the Germans delighted in military music, the orchestra would play a selection of patriotic tunes beginning with "You won't get Alsace and Lorraine", which the Germans applauded in all innocence.

In the evening, for those who liked it, there was also the thrill of gambling. With thick clouds of acrid smoke rising round them, the gamblers would press round a

\*Time is passing, time is passing, my lassiel

Alas, it isn't time, it's we, who are passing away. . . ."



AT THE STALAG: "MAIN STREET,"



AT THE STALAG: HUT XII ROOM 2

table covered with green baize where a miniature race-course was laid out. The hurdles were made of cardboard and the greyhounds or horses were cut out of old tins and painted. A torch fixed overhead threw a beam of light on to the table, and all around the little flames of the oil-lamps flickered in the dark. Two or three accordions and several mouth-organs kept repeating hackneyed tunes which made one almost sick. Little bunches of onlookers, whose faces were invisible in the dark, clustered round in the bunks nearest the table. In a corner the employees of the Pari Mutuel\* called out the odds, while the speaker shouted particulars of the next race. This clandestine betting went on every evening. The banker, an old Company Sergeant-Major of the Colonial Army, made 10,000 marks profit out of it in six months. He used to hide the money inside his shirt, in his scapular. 10,000 marks for selling a few hours of oblivion! But these hours were so precious that no one blamed him.

As soon as the silhouette shows or the races were over one sank back into a state of apathy.

This boredom was made worse by the feeling of disgust that one often felt for one's own person. We were filthy. We had hardly any underwear, and if we washed it in winter it took a month to dry. Besides, we were pestered with swarms of fleas. The cold never affected them! They got into everything, into the seams of our clothes and even into the mattresses if one was lucky enough to have a mattress. It was quite impossible to get rid of them, and if anyone was so misguided as to wear wool next the skin, he would be crawling with fleas at the end of a month.

"Go to the shower-baths!" said the Germans. There were lukewarm shower-baths twice a week, but it was hopeless to go to them; you only succeeded in exchanging fleas with your next-door neighbour, and you had your

\*The legal system of betting on French horse-races.

pocket-book or your fountain-pen stolen by the boys who worked there and who made a habit of reselling everything they stole at a huge profit on the camp's Black Market. The only way of getting rid of one's fleas was to go and spend an hour or two every day at the wash-basin and catch them one by one. To speak of wash-basins is a euphemism. Each hut certainly had a wash-basin, but in many Stalags the water was turned off at the main from the first of December to the first of March so as to prevent the pipes from freezing. Nevertheless, every morning a certain number of prisoners who were fastidious about bodily cleanliness would go to the icy wash-room, where they would be joined by the very worst cases of flea-ridden men whose burning flesh made washing absolutely imperative. There they stood, half naked, with goose-flesh and chattering teeth, each man keeping well away from the others so as not to catch more fleas, and there they would carefully search every inch of their grey-looking underclothes. Poor shivering devils, will there ever be a Daumier to paint the bottomless misery of your sordid 'redemption'?

Alas, there were not only the fleas to be coped with, there were also the Germans.

The German officers in the Stalags were of the same breed as the ones in the Oflag: the dregs of the Army. Their main concern was to avoid sullyng themselves by contact with the prisoners and to avoid 'scenes'.

The camp commandant only put in an appearance when he was indulging in his favourite hobby: shooting crows. (His colleague, the Commandant of Stalag 1A, had a less civilised hobby, which consisted in beating a path for himself with his walking-stick through the prisoners' ranks, whenever he went for a walk.) Towards eleven o'clock, when the weather was fine, our Camp Commandant came out of the Kommandantur with great

dignity, followed at a respectful distance by his orderly who carried the gun. They walked slowly along the barbed-wire fences, and when the Commandant decided to have a shot, the orderly presented him with his gun. The Commandant took aim, fired a shot, and quietly handed the gun back to the orderly.

In the absence of this Nimrod, the camp was ruled by the Sonderführer, a burly man who looked like a sea-lion, and who was always ready with a string of oaths. It was he who, in Autumn 1940, chose the confidence man. He first of all appointed a futurist poet, who was actually a homosexual and a crook. The Germans had captured him not on the field but in the prison of Abbeville, if I remember rightly, where he was serving a sentence for wearing a uniform illegally. When this futurist crook had been repatriated as a so-called 'serious invalid', the Sonderführer appointed first a Pole (a naturalised French subject), then a Hungarian, and they in turn got themselves 'repatriated'. What mattered was not so much that the 'representative' was appointed by the Germans (Laval couldn't have objected to that), but that the Sonderführer entrusted the most untrustworthy creatures with powers to fix the order in which the prisoners were to be repatriated.\* When it was known that a contingent of sick and ailing was to be repatriated, lots of men shammed sickness in order to have their names placed on the list. This wouldn't have mattered so much if it hadn't prejudiced the chances of those who were really sick. These men would ingratiate themselves with the Sonderführer's favourites and the Sonderführer invariably passed the men whom they recommended, since the only thing he cared about was the authority and prestige which he got by wielding his power in this arbitrary way. Others

\*Many of the confidence men were men of absolute integrity, however, and I wish to pay tribute to them here.

benefited financially, but he held the reins. On the day of departure all those who had been marked for repatriation would prepare their little bundles, and gather together. Every time the names were called out some prisoners found that theirs had been omitted. They would go off angrily to the Kartei where the confidence man would receive them with the words:

"Don't get worked up, you'll be sent back next time. I'll see to it myself."

They would go back to their huts with heavy hearts. When the next departure was due, it was preceded by feverish days of impatience, terror and hope, and some would again be turned down. With eyes full of tears, they would hang on to the barbed wire and watch the others going off to the station. . . .

The Stalag sentries were just as stupid as the ones at the Oflag, only more brutal because they were dealing with prisoners of their own rank. There were some exceptions, however, and a few of them even wanted to be friendly with us. One German whom I used to see every day was extremely anxious to tell me how much he loved France. I'm sure he was sincere, just as he was absolutely sincere when he told me that only the Fuhrer could accomplish the great work of Franco-German friendship. One morning—as it happened the very morning of my escape—he brought me a mysterious little parcel which contained (I could hardly believe my eyes) two portions of Brie cheese, and all he wanted in exchange was a piece of soap.

But on the whole brutality was appalling. Hardly a day passed, at least during the first six months, without one of us at meal-times being struck with a bull-hide whip or a piece of barbed wire, or being bitten by a dog—merely because we were not standing in line or were not quick enough in presenting our mess bowl. In the con-

fusion of the first summer not a week passed without at least one prisoner being assassinated.

Sentries could, at a stretch, be excused on the grounds that they lost their heads or were carrying out their orders literally. Moreover, after the summer of 1940, they were admittedly much more economical with their cartridges. During the fifty days which I spent at the Stalag, I never heard a single shot fired. But the Feldwebels, who not only witnessed this brutality but did everything to encourage it, were incxcusable. If there is one category of Germans which the prisoners hate more than any other, and with most cause, it is the Feldwebels, born torturers and slave-drivers specially chosen to break the prisoners. In Stalag 1A, when a prisoner omitted to salute them, they would force him to kneel down in the snow, or would get two sentries to hold him down, while they broke their sticks on his back. In Stalag 1B, there was Braun, in Stalag 2B, there was Slawik. These Feldwebels will receive no more mercy from the prisoners whom they tortured than the prisoners received from them.

In civilian life Braun had been the director of the work-house at Marienburg. In June 1940 he had suddenly been given the job of keeping order at Stalag 1B. It was an easy matter, so he used violence. He was most active during roll-calls and meal-times, and would go rushing round, shouring orders and brandishing his whip. One day the four hundred prisoners of one of the huts were having difficulty in getting out through a very narrow door. One prisoner, who happened to be a Capucin monk, seemed to be going too slowly, and he had his skull cracked by a blow from Braun's revolver. In December 1940, during a roll-call, Company Sergeant-Major Falco got out of line; he was clubbed over the head and knocked out: it would be lucky for him if he managed to get away with three weeks in hospital. In the beginning of January 1941,



Braun entered Hut 15, the monitors' hut, at roll-call. He gave an order in German: it was not understood and therefore not obeyed. Braun drew out his revolver in a rage and fired into the hut. Luckily no one was killed. But one monitor, who was not on duty and had stayed in his bunk, got a bullet in his thigh. At about the same time, Company Sergeant-Major G——, who had instinctively raised his hands to protect himself when Braun was about to hit him, was arrested. In March 1941 he was due for a court-martial—everyone expected that he would get at least two or three years in a prison fortress.

At Stalag 2B, Inspector Slawik found his cudgel good enough. He used to make Polish prisoners stand to attention while he clubbed them and it was he who struck the young Abbé de Chancé across the face with his whip merely for keeping his hands in his pockets during a roll-call. Once, when two Polish sailors tried to escape from the camp, and were caught, Slawik, besides giving them the normal camp punishment, gave them three days' flogging in the mornings and, for two hours in the afternoons, made them stand against a wall with their arms outstretched. Whenever Frenchmen dared protest against such cruelties, he used to say with irrefutable logic: "You shouldn't have let yourselves be taken prisoner!"

It is quite impossible, in a country like Germany, that such things could have taken place without the knowledge of the higher authorities. Far from it; the authorities were not only aware of this brutality, but they tolerated it and approved of it as a means of discipline. The proof of this is that the torturers were never reprimanded, and that of all the sentries who were guilty of having killed prisoners only one was punished, on June 15th 1940, at Stalag 1D, and then only because the indignation of the French made it imperative. Another proof is the fact that Slawik and Braun were allowed to go on tyrannising over their

prisoners for months and years, and no attention was paid to protests. In fact if you dared lodge a complaint to the authorities, you were made to pay for it afterwards. For example the Commandant at Stalag 1B made Sergeant d'Audigné, son of the former President of the Paris Municipal Council, forfeit his position as hut-leader because he dared complain about the ill-treatment of his fellow prisoners.

From their yellow posters bearing the words (which Maréchal Pétain has omitted to consider): "Feind bleibt Feind" ("The enemy remains the enemy") which they posted up outside the camps, it was obvious that the Germans were out to encourage brutality. Moreover, they were systematic in the degree of brutality which prisoners of various nationalities were to receive. The English, though they loathed them, got the best treatment; the Poles, especially the Polish Jews, received, together with the negroes\* and now the Russians, the worst treatment of all. The Walloons† and the French came somewhere in between the two. The Walloons only needed to be taught how to live; the French had to be reminded that they had been defeated. When Maréchal Pétain arranged to have woollen blankets sent to his dear prisoners, the Germans confiscated them and replaced them by thin ones which were fifty per cent German forest, and then expected us to be grateful to Hitler for his generosity. Monsieur Scapini said nothing. He was as dumb as he was blind.

The Belgians and the French are creatures of inferior quality whom the perfect Nazi despises. But the Poles are mere scrabs. The people feel about them exactly as Goebbels has ordered them to feel. The Polish prisoners

\*Until the day when the Nazis decided to pursue a special native policy and sent colonial prisoners back to France.

†The Flemish prisoners were liberated after six months imprisonment.

who arrived at Stalag 2B after the Warsaw campaign had to spend the whole of the first winter under canvas. It was their own loss if they died off! The Germans took away all their thick clothing and their boots, and gave them old rags to wear and clogs. When they dared to celebrate the anniversary of the 1918 Armistice, their hut was surrounded at three in the morning; they were woken up with blows and made to run barefoot in the snow for ten minutes, round their hut.

As for the Jews, the ordinary run of brutalities was not enough for them. Eight hundred Jews spent fourteen months at Stalag 1A without being allowed to walk about freely inside the camp itself, a right granted to all the other prisoners. After these first fourteen months they were formed into disciplinary companies, run by Germans who came from Poland. When it was found that the Polish and Alsatian Jews could speak German, it was considered dangerous to let them loose in the Kommandos, where they might have corrupted the population, so a ghetto was set aside for them in the camp. As they couldn't be left idle, they were given the disgusting task of cleaning out the latrines and the drains, with only their bare hands and a few old tins.

The Stalag prisoners had yet another enemy to face—the most insidious and treacherous of all—illness. Maréchal Pétain once had the misfortune to speak of the "Healthy life in the camps". No one will forget this. In 1940, the Vichy authorities prided themselves on the fact that the death-rate in the prisoner of war camps was not so very high during the first six months of captivity. There were sixty-three deaths at Stalag 2B during these first six months—not an unreasonable proportion, they thought; besides, the prisoners have done better since then.

In order to find out just how healthy this life was, you only needed to take a look into the shower-baths. There

you saw men covered with boils from head to foot, or suffering from rupture, or whose limbs were swollen and twisted with rheumatism, or whose hands and feet were frostbitten. There were only the visible afflictions . . . there were many cases of consumption, and men of twenty-five were dying from ulcers in the stomach.

Every morning before dawn the sick would start queuing up outside the Infirmary, with the snow falling heavily. The first ones turned up at six-thirty a.m. and waited about in the bitter cold, stamping their feet and trying to keep warm in a muffler which had come by post from France. This lasted until eight a.m., when the door was opened and as many as possible shoved their way into the waiting-room; a sentry stood by with a whip to keep them in order. At eight-fifteen a.m. the door was closed again till the next morning; it was only opened during the day for an extremely serious and urgent case. Even when you had managed to get inside, you could not be certain of staying there. The patients would start undressing; then a medical orderly, sometimes assisted by a soldier, would walk in and take a look at the patients. If there were too many, he would turn away the ones whom he imagined might be shamming illness. If they refused to leave they were kicked out by force.

At last the patient was examined by the doctor, who usually did his best, whether he was French or German, and only complained that he hadn't the necessary medical supplies. There was rarely any iodine, or methylated spirits, or anaesthetics, and there were not many disinfectants. The dressings were often made of paper and the surgical equipment was always insufficient.

If a prisoner was sent to hospital he had to put up with hunger on top of his illness. In order to get enough food he would have to barter, first his socks, then his shirt and finally his pullover. In one hospital in Poland prisoners

were reduced, as early as 1941, to parting with their wedding-rings in exchange for a few bowls of soup.

The terrible thing about illness was that you were faced with only one alternative: either you worked or you died. As soon as you came out of the infirmary or the hospital you were sent back to work in a Kommando, without being able to have the prescribed period of convalescence, as the German labour officials seldom paid any attention to the doctor's orders.

One day a poor old soldier went to be medically examined by a French doctor. His body was covered with abscesses, and his knees had swollen to the size of balloons through rheumatism which he had got from working in the marshes round the Vistula. The doctor tried to cure the abscesses by the method of autovaccination. While he was operating we saw huge tears running down the man's cheeks and he had the look of a wounded animal. He was no coward; his tough old peasant's body had been through far worse things than this, but just now he was fed up, more than fed up . . . broken.

The doctor was upset and said a little gruffly:

"Come to me every morning for your injection. You will be all right here for the time being. I will try to get you into the Infirmary for two or three weeks."

"And then?" asked the old man, "and then, will they send me off to a Kommando?"

My friend the doctor gave a slight look of impatience. The soldier broke. . . . His nerves snapped, no doubt for the first time in his hard life, and he sobbed like a child, uncontrolledly. Then little by little he pulled himself together and, his manly pride wounded, he murmured: "Sorry, doctor. I have behaved like a coward."

"Now then, clear off," the doctor answered gruffly.

A German medical orderly suddenly appeared and gave a hearty laugh. The doctor gave him one withering look,

seized the syringe which he had brought and bent down over the next patient, without saying a word.

Now as I read these lines over again I am suddenly seized with a scruple. Was it really so terrible? Or rather, was it terrible in the way I have described? Obviously being objective on a full stomach is quite a different matter from being objective when you are living through hell. But when I describe the crimes of men like Braun and Slawik, I have no doubt that these crimes are horrible, objectively, and I hope the reader will think the same, however hardened and blasé he may have become after hearing accounts of atrocities for four whole years. Naturally, at the time all these brutalities were taken as so many incidents in the daily round, and they caused no terror. If many prisoners felt anything approaching fear it was in a complicated kind of way and I don't think it lasted long. For example, French peasants felt apprehensive at first in a strange country which they could not always picture geographically. But when they discovered in and through their gaolers a whole people who had both the power and the systematic will to inspire terror, the prisoners were not terrified. They were merely horrified, all the more so because they had grown up sheltered from tyranny and with the idea that the ambition to inspire terror was absolutely incompatible with the dignity of man.

No, the real tragedy of imprisonment was not this brutality of the sentries, nor hunger, nor any particular personal suffering of the prisoner. The really tragic thing is that during this war French prisoners have endured a long drawn-out agony. What is worse than *being* a prisoner is *remaining* a prisoner. Every night when you go to bed you know that you will wake up in the morning only *to go on* being a prisoner, among a whole army of

prisoners. At this moment, while I am writing these lines, four or five million years of human life have been spent in full awareness of their uselessness, doomed to oppression, slavery, wretchedness and boredom. When fifty thousand Egyptian fellahin laboured for twenty years to build a pyramid, they thought they were winning a victory over time and space. The prisoner, as I knew him, saw only Nothingness ahead. Day after day he felt himself deteriorating mentally and physically, his knees growing heavier and heavier, his brain growing more and more clogged. It required a great deal of effort even to go on shaving every day, or to think out an idea and then to connect this idea with another one logically. "Oh living death," he would say to himself, "you hem us in and hold us in your grip." The bitterness he felt against mankind as a whole would poison his every thought, even against his will. The betrayal had bred distrust, and in the prisoner of war camps the prisoners still viewed one another with suspicion even after six months; each assignment to the Kartai seemed excessive and each repatriation a scandal. In spite of the common lot of misfortune, the spirit of brotherhood was for a long time restricted to a limited circle of three or four trusted friends. And even when the prisoners had little by little regained confidence in one another and were beginning to be bound together in that warm and loving companionship which was gradually extended to include all prisoners of every nationality, the prisoners' world still remained a closed world, prey to the double psychosis of absence and persecution. A whole army of men sacrificed and doomed to impotence, the prisoners felt themselves cut off from the world and alone, as alone as one *can* only be at the hour of betrayal. They felt themselves outcasts in a world where every night men came home to sleep beside their wives, and where whoever wished to fight for his freedom had the consola-

tion of being able to do so. And beyond the barbed wire people lived almost unperturbed by the misfortunes of the prisoners. Pétain's solicitude for them oozed hypocrisy. Laval spat in their faces by hoping for a German victory. . . . The prisoners do not wish for pity, but when the day of repatriation comes, let no one go and tell a prisoner that he has grown healthier and stronger in his Stalag. . . .

I left their midst at the time of the greatest despondency (though not of the greatest hardship, alas!) I left them when everything seemed most lost and hopeless. There seemed to be no more destiny; the future was drowned in night and no stars shone. France seemed to have come to the end of her tether. All soothsayings were vain and empty, all the prophets had lied. Despair was no more than the end of all hope.

And yet the prisoners went on hoping.

## V

### POTATO LIFTING

MILLET has given me an account of his experience on Kommando work.

He left Oflag 2D on September 3rd 1940, at the same time as the five hundred other Acting Second Lieutenants who were sent into Stalags. On their arrival at the Stalag, the Germans immediately opened hostilities by informing the young Frenchmen that they would now have to salute all German ranks from corporals upwards and that they were expected to work as the Reich did not wish to feed useless mouths. The Acting Second Lieutenants replied that they would continue to look upon themselves as officers and that it was against their sense of honour to work for the enemy, and that, moreover, if the Germans



insisted on grouping them with the non-commissioned officers, they would still be exempt from labour service by international law. From then on the Germans and the young Lieutenants were at daggers drawn. The Acting Second Lieutenants were then subjected to so-called 'favourable' treatment, which consisted in being put on half rations, having to stand to attention for four or five hours at a time, or being made to drill (one of the exercises, which had to be repeated seventy times at a stretch, being to lie flat on the ground and then stand upright), with the prospect of a volley of blows from rifle butts if one failed to keep time. After three weeks of this régime, the Germans had still not managed to break the Lieutenants' resistance, so they decided to appoint three hundred of them for Labour Service as 'volunteers'. Even at the point of the bayonet not one of them consented to sign his own papers. The most recalcitrant ones were severely beaten up and, with machine-guns trained on them, three hundred new workers were taken off to their respective Kommandos.

Thus Millet and nine other acting Second Lieutenants were locked up in a cattle van with a band of Flemish soldiers. October is the month for lifting the potato crops, and it is also the month when you first begin to feel the bitter cold in Central Europe. Tightly packed in the jolting van, and blowing their numbed fingers, the ten Acting Second Lieutenants began enumerating their civilian occupations. There was a bank manager, an insurance broker, a young magistrate, an advertising manager, a journalist, a chemist, an architect, a professor, a teacher and an art student. Their ages varied between twenty-two and thirty-six years. They were all philosophical and the future laid no surprises for them.

They exchanged their impressions about the German sentry in charge of them. He was a Prussian to the

marrow—stocky, red in the face, bovine, and quick to strike; he only melted when, with shining eyes, he praised the beauties of the German countryside.

"What a fool the creature is!" exclaimed the charming Curtis, "and as nasty as they make 'em. . . ."

"Never you mind," answered another young Lieutenant, with a face as smooth as a girl's, "we'll tame the old Dudule!"

From then on, the sentry was always known as 'Dudule'.

"After several hours' journey," Millet goes on to say, "we got out at a little Pomeranian station. There we were met by a strapping peasant, who looked us up and down as though he were buying cattle at the fair. We also took a good look at him and decided that he wasn't a bad sort. He was square and well-built—one of those hardworking peasants, exacting as far as work is concerned, but good caters, not men to stint one over food. That, after all, was our main concern. We soon found we had not been mistaken.

"We set out for the village. We had already made up our minds that the more depressing things looked, the more cheerful we should try to be. So, when we got to the little village, we began to assert our independence by singing at the top of our voices the bawdiest French songs that we had inherited from our ancestors. Throwing out our chests in spite of the weight of our 'bundles', and walking briskly so as not to hear Dudule's angry remonstrations, we made a good impression on the onlookers who were hanging round the streets, and, above all, on the village girls, whom we saluted gallantly.

"We reached our quarters—a shooting hut, which let in quantities of icy rain. Twenty-five privates were already installed there, but when they saw that we were officers, they let us have a corner to ourselves. They were decent

fellows, all of them Lorraines and Bretons, and not a sneak among them.

"The 'boss' insisted on being present himself at our 'installation'. Being an ex-Feldwebel, he knew it would pay him to take good care of us. He was not at all stingy with his straw, and our bunks were relatively comfortable. He left us when he had settled us in, and told us that his farm was about five miles away and that he would expect us at six-thirty the following morning.

"We were left alone with Dudule, who was too tired to punish us for our wild singing, and was leaning sadly on his gun and grumbling because the place was too far from the pubs.

"We lost no time in beginning to train him. He had just addressed one of us in the familiar second person. Immediately one of our interpreters, a young *chasseur*, rebuked him and explained that we were officers and that he would have to address us in the polite third person. Dudule went red in the face and wanted to argue. 'Look here, my man,' interrupted the *chasseur* rudely, 'we may have to look after pigs together, but remember to keep in your place. You are only a private, as far as I can see, and, moreover, you are an enemy soldier. Remember this or I shall have to report you to your superiors!' We looked so self-possessed that Dudule was taken aback. If he had stood up to this, we should have had to pay for it later. But we all raised our voices and shouted with the result that the sentry gave in.

"We had won our first point.

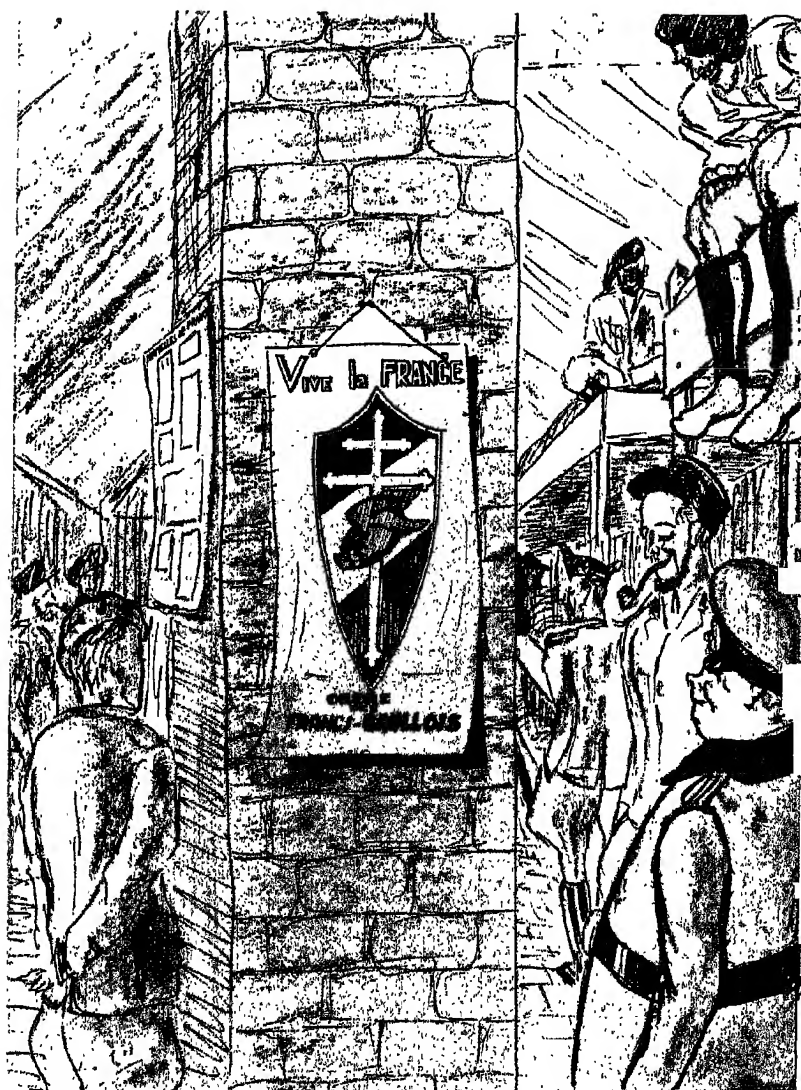
"In order to recover his dignity, Dudule read out in a grave voice the time-table for the following morning:

Get up at five a.m.

Start off at five-thirty a.m.

Breakfast at the farm at six-thirty a.m.

Start work at seven a.m.



"MORALE"



A DE-LOUSING PARTY

"Then he began to take leave of us for the night.

"'Very good, my friend,' said the interpreter, 'but shut the door after you, because we're nervous of thieves.'

"Dudule, who didn't understand what the Frenchman meant, gravely explained that he was going to lock us in: those were his orders. He was even more perplexed when he saw us burst out laughing!! It was a very confused Dudule—faithful soldier of the Reich—who withdrew that night from his confounded *Franzosen*; the poor fellow looked downcast and apprehensive of the future.

"Then our life in the fields began. On the whole we were very lucky. We had struck a farm where the work was hard but where we were at least properly fed. We started work at seven a.m. and our day, which was only interrupted by the mid-day meal and two snacks, rarely ended before seven p.m. We were given about half an hour before supper, to wash ourselves at the farm pump, and then we would return home, dead tired and drop down on our bunks, sometimes without taking off our clothes lest they get damp overnight.

"The work was terribly monotonous. We weren't expected to accomplish feats of superhuman strength, only to dig up potatoes. But this meant spending the whole day bent double and consequently getting aches and pains in our backs. We should have been a very appropriate subject for a painting by Millet, which would have had for its title, not 'The Gleaners', but 'The Potato Gatherers'. In this picture the background would be a heavy grey sky, and flat country stretching away to the horizon, where it would have a fringe of pine-forests and birch-trees. In the foreground, there would be about ten men doubled up with potato sacks covering their knees.

"A week passed like this. Then, on Sunday, we went to the farm, feeling happy for the first time because we

should be able to wash from head to foot and rest. We found the house bustling with activity. The 'boss' and his two sons were in uniform, and the women-folk, dressed up in their best clothes, were busy preparing a sumptuous feast. For a minute we thought we might be invited to it, but we were mistaken. The family was celebrating because it was the anniversary of the death of their son who had been killed during the campaign in France, for the greater glory of Hitler. These people were jubilating because they possessed a 'War Hero' in their family. We only got a look-in after the feast was over, when we were given the remains.

"Then another week of potato digging began, with the same long, monotonous days. But, somehow, there was something new about us. We had changed. In spite of our strenuous work and our backache, we began to revive. A kind of physical joy and well-being came over us, just because we were being well fed. We felt exuberant and enormously cheerful. The slightest remark, usually about our guard, made us roar with laughter. We had nicknamed everyone, the farmer, the farmer's wife, and all the members of the household, the pigs, the ducks, the horses and the cats, and in our eyes they assumed a kind of supernatural aura which made them in turn quaint and grotesque. Every now and then we would burst into peals of uncontrollable laughter, much to the amazement of the Germans.

"But how we blessed our ancestors for the hearty laughter which we had inherited from them, the laughter which relaxes one and frees one from troubles!

"And yet, just like children, we would suddenly pass from hilariousness into black melancholy. There were moments which seemed interminable. Now and again we would realise with horror that fate had played a terrible trick on us, by turning us into slaves to gather in

the Pomcranian potato crops. At such times we would be livid with envy when we thought of all the people who were lucky enough to be free and really human.

"This 'potato spicen' came over one unexpectedly. The slightest thing brought it upon us—a letter from France, a chance word spoken without thinking, or the memory of a young girl whom each one of us would begin to look upon as his own fiancée after hearing so much of her gentleness. These were cruel hours when we felt, not only our own misfortune, but the misfortune of the whole group. Our bad luck weighed down on our shoulders like a cloak of lead. Each one of us, victim of fate, felt crushed. We could not even blame unknown forces; each one had to blame himself, because this fate was the work of us men ourselves. No doubt we were young enough to have had the excuse of innocence, but, nevertheless, we felt responsible. We suffered as Frenchmen, that is to say as men preordained for centuries to fight for a certain conception of mankind. We suffered as Frenchmen because France had failed in her mission by allowing herself to be beaten because we had been incapable of defeating her.

"Hardened collaborators would have treated us as children with no sense of reality—but dyed-in-the-wool 'collaborators' would have taken us, no doubt, for a crowd of fellows divorced from all sense of reality. But this crowd round Péguy had all France behind them! Even though they had done their bit in battle, they felt they had been guilty of having ill-defended that liberty which they held so dear, because they were the kind of men who shoulder their responsibilities rather than leave them to others. They were Frenchmen, and they knew what it meant. And that life which they had held cheap on the field of battle, they were more ready than ever to give in sacrifice. They knew what they were doing."

Thus moved with the same impulse, ten virtual



candidates for prison refused to give in—even to themselves—and squared their shoulders in fighting spirit. They knew they had not the right to despair. A distracted government might possibly sign an armistice, but for their part, they refused to admit defeat while they had life and knew what to do with it. They were a mixed lot, coming from all sorts of classes, but all ten of them knew that they were one.

## VI

### THE KOMMANDOS

INSIDE the camps prisoners might, at a pinch, have imagined themselves to be persecuted by a special breed of torturers, for in no country are goalers ever regarded as a particularly pleasant lot of people. But when they were despatched to the Kommandos to do land work or factory work, it was the average German, in his everyday life, that the prisoners came to know.

From the very beginning, the manner in which the prisoners were recruited for Kommando work was so inhuman and so out of keeping with their idea of personal dignity that this alone would have given them a foretaste of the kind of experience which lay in store for them. The mere sight of the men who were to allot their respective jobs to them was enough to dispel any illusions they may have entertained. First of all they were herded together and penned up on the Stalag square. It was a slave market, but the slaves were men who had supposed that the mere fact of living in the twentieth century was sufficient guarantee against such barbarity. They were numbered, beaten or prodded into position with bayonets and made to stand while German officers and soldiers felt

their muscles, examined their sunken cheeks and sallow complexions with contempt, and questioned them about their antecedents. The prisoners replied, though they knew very well that nothing they said would be taken into account. One young Acting Lieutenant, on being asked his civil profession by a German Captain, replied that he was a teacher of philosophy. Surprised by his youthful appearance, the officer asked him how old he was. "Twenty-four," said the young Frenchman. "Well, my friend, in Germany one is still a student at your age!" He replied: "It may be, sir, that in your country people are slow-witted!" This young Lieutenant was sent to work on a farm to ponder over Kantian virtues.

On the following morning at dawn, or just before dawn, a group of men would be bundled out of a hut by sentries and made to line up in two rows while they were searched. The prisoners would see some Hun pounce on their parcels, burst them open and remove perhaps their most treasured possessions—confiscate a blanket, or a utensil the value of which could only be appreciated by one who had been reduced to eating and drinking with his hands alone. The poor wretches then hastily picked up their scattered belongings from the snow, and, with sentries prodding them on and shouting "Schnell! Schnell!" they would be made to file past a guard, who inspected them to see that their heads were freshly shaven. Finally, they would set out for the camp.

Some prisoners were fortunate enough to be sent to places where they were not too badly off and where at least they had the double advantage of getting enough to eat and escaping from boredom.

A few prisoners, like Vaudreuil and his friend Corporal Buisson, even fell on their feet in a most remarkable way.

Vaudreuil, an industrialist from Le Havre, and the Parisian Buisson, a famous wholesale dealer in potatoes

at the Halle, were sent to work as odd-job men in a little hotel at a small East Prussian seaside resort. Vaudreuil spoke German fairly fluently, and Buisson, who knew not a word of German, easily made himself understood by means of elaborate gesticulations. The hotel proprietor was extremely flattered to have two such eminent French personalities in his service. The two men installed themselves as comfortably as possible, with the firm determination to do themselves well, until a favourable opportunity for playing truant should come their way. As they wished to avoid trouble, they both did a certain amount of work: hefty Vaudreuil wielded an axe with gusto, while able and cunning Buisson turned his hand to everything, including young womens' petticoats. . . .

The servants' quarters at the hotel were occupied by generous-hearted Polish maids, whose kind attentions Buisson did not refuse. One girl would bring him brandy which she had 'borrowed' from the boss, while the other mended his socks, or saved him some special delicacy which was meant for the best clients of the hotel.

While Buisson looked after himself in his own fashion, Vaudreuil was busy lavishing advice, first on his boss, then on the Mayor and finally on the whole little town, which he soon managed to get into order in double quick time. By the end of summer 1940, two French prisoners ruled the roost in a little East Prussian seaside resort! Everyone asked them how long the war would last, and Vaudreuil would very calmly disconcert the people who questioned him by telling them that the war would last a long time and that it would end with the downfall of Germany. Although holding our friend in great esteem, the village baker had too great an admiration for his Führer to be able to accept such an hypothesis. Instead of contradicting Vaudreuil, he decided to make a bet with him. This was in August 1940, and the baker maintained that England

would be defeated in September. If Vaudreuil's prophecy turned out to be correct the baker promised to stand him a bottle of brandy every month, until Germany's victory. This was how the two friends were able to obtain, up to the eve of their escape, a regular supply of brandy at the Reich's expense!

But everyone is not born lucky, and even if many prisoners enjoyed a certain amount of freedom, at certain times, and were able to wangle on a colossal scale, there were countless others who suffered unbelievable misery while on Kommando work.

The first thing I should like to mention is that a great many sentries and civilians gave way to deplorable excesses of brutality, but that this behaviour was not necessarily systematic. We found that as a rule the very same German whose heart melted at the sight of your wife and children, would suddenly, for the flimsiest reason, turn into a torturer. For example, at Tommuchten, the peasant Trandjuss, who was not usually a bad sort, gave his prisoner a thorough beating simply because he had gone fifty yards from the farmhouse without asking permission.

Sometimes it was due to language difficulties that prisoners were ill-treated, and sometimes because the employers were anxious to obtain the maximum output of work and profit from their prisoners. The boss would tip the overseer, and then, if a prisoner so much as lifted his head from his work, a sound thwack would remind him of his duty. The desire for maximum profits sometimes became such an obsession with the employer that it outweighed all human considerations. One day, in February 1941, seven Frenchmen were carrying rails along the railway line which runs between Gombinnem and Ebenrod, in East Prussia. An officer came to inspect the work and ordered the Frenchmen to take off their gloves,

which, he said, made their hands clumsy. The result was that the seven men had their hands frostbitten.

A great many brutalities were due to the drunkenness of the sentries and guards. Germans do everything in excess. When they drink they make themselves drunk, and when they are drunk they either weep or 'go berserk'. For example, at the Dismiski Kommando, near Ostrolenka, whenever the Feldwebel had been drinking he would post two sentries at the entrance of the prisoners' hut and then rush into the room with his cudgel and beat the prisoners like an angry trainer, until he tired himself out. At the Chiko works, in Königsberg, one of the prisoners' guardians was a professional boxer who kept up his form on alcohol, and who in order to maintain the tradition of the ring, beat up two Frenchmen every night.

The prisoners were often ill-treated because they were slow in saluting. It was merely for this reason that, at Raschau, the sentry Schmid, from Düsseldorf, forced Dutey and his friends to walk barefoot in the snow. At Elmenors, between Lübeck and Hamburg, some prisoners were returning to their huts after the day's work at the workshop. On the way, at the corner of Wohlgast Farm, they passed a twenty-year-old S.A., who drew up when he came to them, raised his arm and shouted "Heil Hitler!" The prisoners paid no attention. Furious, the sentry made them wheel round, brought them to a standstill in front of the S.A. and tried to force them to salute him by beating them with his rifle butt. A French N.C.O. was innocent enough to remind the man of international regulations. The sentry made him step out of the ranks, slapped his face and ordered him to kneel down in front of the little Nazi.

A certain amount of bullying was due to actual sadism. "At Allenstein, in Prussia, there were seven hundred and thirty-five of us prisoners," says Vauchelin, the boxer.

"We used to sleep in the main hall of the slaughter-house, where we worked in the day-time. We lived on German rations and we were always famished. In the hall there was a balcony about thirty feet high. In the evenings three or four Hun N.C.O.s would appear on the balcony. They would tie a loaf of bread on to a string and throw it to us. But the string was too short. At first we pretended not to notice; then they began to jerk the string. Finally, we would get up and try to catch their confounded bread. But they would draw up the string, and we would be obliged to jump. We used to go mad with rage, but they would continue to dangle the bread over our heads for half an hour, sometimes, before letting it go."

As for the living conditions which the Germans provided for their prisoners, neither the Pétains nor the Laval have mentioned them in France. Sauckel's propaganda may affirm that in the larger factories the sanitary installations and the canteens are generally more modern or better managed than in France, but the majority of the French workers in Germany are, nevertheless, forced to sleep in unheated quarters, often with leaky roofs, and they are locked up in their rooms from nine o'clock at night until five or six o'clock in the morning, and the animals' litter is changed more often than the straw which the prisoners sleep on. "Fleas have to feed on French flesh," laughed a farmer when one of our comrades asked for fresh straw after eight months.

And what about the prisoners' food? Goering said that if anyone in Europe was to go hungry it would certainly not be the Germans. At the Max Jonke brick factory, at Gut-Pürmallen, the meals in Roquemont's day consisted of two pieces of bread in the morning and two more pieces at night with milk or fish. At Prosfield, Frank, who used to start his day by grooming horses at four-thirty a.m., and

who spent the rest of the day working on the farm until ten o'clock at night, only got a bowl of clear soup, three pieces of bread and a few boiled potatoes per day. And the prisoners who worked at Wensken or in the Lower Vistula at digging irrigation canals from six in the morning until six at night, standing in water up to their thighs, only got five ounces of bread, half an ounce of fat and a thin soup as their daily ration.

Although prisoners from one end of Germany to the other kept repeating their slogan: "Nicht essen, nicht arbeit" (no food, no work), they can be divided into two categories: those who had enough to eat—and those who were hungry. In spite of their hard life, their drudgery, discomfort, boredom, vermin and sometimes blows, the prisoners belonging to the former category retained their normal reflexes and remained sensitive to pleasures and, alas, to anxieties and sorrows. When they did manage to eat their fill, they would sometimes be seized with fits of almost animal exuberance. But those who never received even the strict minimum of food to appease their hunger were haunted with only one obsession, i.e. how to supplement their rations. It is quite wrong to think that the less food you eat, the more elevated your soul becomes. Only those who have known what hunger means can realise what an appalling obsession hunger can be. I don't mean the hunger of a man who has been shipwrecked and who has eaten his last biscuit, but the hunger which does not kill you, or rather which only kills you by degrees. A man can last like this for months, or even for years. Thus reduced to the level of a beast he finds that necessity breeds primitive instincts in him, sometimes the worst instincts. Many a solid friendship, based on mutual suffering, has failed to stand the test of hunger. On the other hand, a mind which has been weakened by undernourishment, reacts only feebly to certain emotions. Moral suffering is

felt less keenly, and even the pangs of separation gradually wear off and become blunted.

In the Kommandos, illness is even more unbearable than hunger. The prisoner is reduced to the conditions of primitive man, with no human means of staving off illness. But, whereas primitive man had recourse to charms and witchcraft, the prisoners knew only too well that medicines, surgery, iodine, methylated spirits, quinine and all these products of science are more efficacious than any witchcraft, although in practice they were seldom able to benefit by them.

How could you get yourself recognised as being ill if you were buried in the depths of Prussia or Pomerania—and if you did not know German? Not only was the health service for prisoners on Kommando work scandalously inadequate\*, but your employers, overseers and sentries were perpetually on their guard against prisoners who might be malingering, and even the well-meaning ones did not wish to waste time by taking you to see the doctor. It was so much simpler to leave everything to nature.

A soldier from Brittany worked at laying telegraph poles near Souvalki for the firm Ludwig Schneider. The German sergeant, who received regular tips from the firm's accountant, refused to inscribe him on the sick-list. The soldier threatened to make a complaint. The German ended by promising to send him to see a doctor on the following day when, so he told him, he would be able to be examined by a Medical Officer. The next day, the Breton insisted on being given a medical inspection and refused to go on working. The Sergeant leapt at him, lashed him with a bullhide whip and then thrust a revolver at his stomach. With a gesture that, in any other

\*The Goldap infirmary, which accommodated 3,000 prisoners, only had fourteen beds. There was no de-lousing apparatus, and the doctors were reduced to opening abscesses with a razor blade.



circumstances, might have seemed theatrical, the French man opened his jacket and bared his chest to the revolver. The German did not dare to shoot him. The following day, the Breton was sent back to the Kommandantur at Hohenstein for 'disciplinary measures'.

Those prisoners who are seriously ill while on Kommando work, but who, somehow, manage to survive, will be very lucky men. In one labour camp, attached to Stalag 1A, two of Monier's friends who were suffering from purulent pleurisy were only recognised as invalids a week after they had reported sick. In both cases they were taken back to the Stalag, twenty miles away, on open sledges, and they both died on the journey. At Wensbach, in January 1941, Grassin complained of swellings on his face and legs. He was not attended to. On the sixth day, he fell into a coma; on the eighth day they took him away, but he died within a few hours.

At Zanow, in Pomerania, two French soldiers worked on a farm as odd-job men. One of them was suddenly seized with an attack of acute appendicitis, and lay down on his bedding. When the farmer's son saw this, he leapt on the man and kicked his ribs. The other Frenchman tried to stop him; he in turn was attacked and his eyebrow was cut open. That evening the sentry led them both to the village doctor, who told one Frenchman that he was a liar, and the other that he deserved what he got. The sentry, who was a good sort, informed the Stalag, and three days later they sent for the sick man. In spite of the pain he was suffering, he had to walk six miles on foot, with his pack on his back, to the nearest railway station. At the other end, he had to walk about the same distance. Then he was sent to a hospital and operated on at once. He had to leave the hospital in less than a week and, three days later, he was sent back to the farm as he had been unable to get anyone to pay any attention to the medical

certificate exempting him from work for a month, which the German M.O. at the camp had signed.

At the Wenstern Kommando, says Auberger, there was a little fellow from Pau who was suffering from tuberculosis of the bones. He had been nicknamed 'Chez-nous' as he was always talking of his 'chez-nous' (home). Every now and then he used to have attacks of intense pain. Each time this happened he would be so bathed in sweat and so doubled up with pain that his fellow-workers expected him to die on the spot. He would come to work, but half the time he would be prostrate with exhaustion and just lie down beside his spade. Finally, after two months, he was sent back to Memel. After a fortnight there, he was again sent back to work, back to his unheated hut and to the mercy of slave-drivers. It was only in January 1941, when he was on the verge of death, that he was sent back to the Stalag permanently. He longed with all his heart to be repatriated as a confirmed invalid, although he realised that this was not likely to happen. I wonder whether his wish was ever fulfilled?

How did French prisoners get on with the ordinary run of Germans whom they came across in the Kommandos? Most of them, as we have already pointed out, had gone to war with remarkably little hatred. When they were on Kommando work, many of them began by trying to explain away their hardships. First of all they studied the Germans carefully, and when they were bullied and ill-treated, they were careful to judge the Germans fairly and not to make generalisations. The hatred which they felt for those who tortured them was not, at first, extended to the whole population. Moreover, if Frenchmen began to sabotage the crops as far back as 1940, they did so more out of a desire for personal revenge against an employer, or a sentry, than through any wilful intention to harm the

enemy. Consequently, many of the prisoners who were repatriated after the first six months, or the first year, only retained, when they looked back on their period of imprisonment, an impression of a confused nightmare and a feeling of immense lassitude.

But, was there ever any human understanding between the individuals of the two nations, or any element of mutual respect which could have compensated a little for the enslavement of the prisoners—and France? We know of no cases in which this happened. There was undoubtedly a great deal of familiarity, but not a spirit of companionship, and, certainly, not friendship. In our experience, the only emotion which the French and Germans had in common was the love of family. In a fit of good-naturedness a German would often admire photographs of his prisoners' wife and children, ask their names, ages, the colour of their hair, and burst into enthusiastic 'Wie schon's' and similar praises. And the Frenchman would do the same on seeing a German's photographs. One of our comrades had a boss whom he loathed. But, when the latter's daughter fell from her bicycle and was taken to the hospital with a fractured skull, the prisoner, who met the father on his way home, was so upset that he could not help running up to the man and giving him a sympathetic handshake, his eyes filled with tears.

Even the idylls between certain prisoners and their conquerors' wives seldom took place without some ulterior motive and a certain amount of risk. We have all come across prisoners who were the delight of their employer's wife, and others who were less ambitious and brought bliss to some woman worker or farm hand. Moreover, this form of direct revenge is one which we viewed with approval. But the German authorities, as everyone knows, had different views of this matter, and they did everything in their power to discourage attempts in this particular

field. One rule, which we had read out to us during the first days of our imprisonment, said that any prisoner who entered into friendly relations with a German woman would be sentenced to imprisonment for anything from two to ten years, and that if he committed a 'culpable offence' he would expose himself to the death penalty. Many a tragedy ensued, and also several tragi-comedies of so-called attempts at seduction.

For example, there was one unfortunate seducer who could hardly have been called a Don Juan: he had a squint and stammered. He was sent to a farm in Pomerania where he was the only handy-man, and there he became the prey of an aged farmer's wife, who was most assiduous in her attentions and who turned out to be a real Mrs Potiphar. At first she showed her love for him by showering little delicacies on him, which he was only too delighted to add to his daily rations. Sometimes she even gave him brandy to drink. Then, one fine day, she could not conceal her passion any longer and there had been the devil to pay. "She was an old hag, utterly hideous," the victim explained, stammering. "It happened when I was in the stable. She followed me there and, all of a sudden, without warning, she threw her arms around me. At that moment, her husband, who must have been suspicious, burst in on us and yelled. In the evening the sentry came to fetch me while the proprietress was shrieking in the kitchen under the old man's blows. . . ."

The Germany which many prisoners had expected to discover in the farms across the Rhine was the Germany of 'the Great Illusion'. They were soon disconcerted by their own experience. At the time of our escape, at least half of the Frenchmen under detention at the Stalags were there because they had been accused of sullyng, or attempting to sully, the Germanic race.

Under these conditions, the prisoners did not run the

risk of marrying into the middle classes while they were in their Kommandos. When the myth of an early repatriation had faded, little by little, the hardships of imprisonment seemed to correspond to a preconceived system of brutality; the slogan 'Feind bleibt Feind' gradually took on its full meaning, and the prisoners slowly began to look upon themselves, not as the victims of a terrible misfortune, but as prisoners of a nation which was still involved in the war and still fighting.

The extraordinary thing is that this gradual evolution in their feelings ended by producing, for a considerable time, not hatred towards the Germans, but contempt, unbelievably violent contempt. I know well that contempt is not comparable with a struggle against Titans, and I do not intend to suggest that there is no such thing as hatred in the prisoner of war camps or in the Kommandos. I was able to watch the gradual development of hatred among the prisoners, and I know that this hatred was sometimes extraordinarily bitter, as in the case of certain Oflag where exasperation at the strict seclusion caused an outbreak of the most virulent nationalism. Nevertheless, I am sure that indiscriminate and universal hatred of the Germans is less strong among prisoners than it is among the Frenchmen who remained in France. For prisoners are soldiers, and the hardships, however inhuman, which they have to endure are largely the result of the discipline of war. So, when contempt was no longer adequate in the face of the Nazi monstrosities, it gave way to horror rather than to hatred.

The Frenchmen in the Kommandos despised the Germans for such elementary things as their coarse cooking or their rough manners. They were sickened by the teutonic gallantry which consists in going up to a woman bending over her work, and giving her a tremendous slap on the seat; they were taken aback by the calm way in

which peasant women who wished to relieve themselves while at work, did so in full view of everyone and amidst the coarse laughter of their fellow workers.

They despised the Germans for letting themselves be fooled so easily, and the prisoners certainly fooled them often enough! One day it will be possible to reveal the vast scale on which Frenchmen were able to extend the Black Market in Germany. For the present I should like to tell the true story of Caudan from Morbihan, a story which went the rounds of every Kommando from one end of East Prussia to the other.

Caudan, a harmless-looking Breton, was sent off to a Kommando against his will to work as an odd-job man. The first day went satisfactorily for both parties. The farmer was easy-going so as not to put off his new farm hand and Caudan worked seriously and diligently with the best good-will. In the evening the farmer called Caudan, gave him a pail-full of milk and a magnificent bone and conveyed to him that he must feed the dog and a newly-arrived member of the stable, a young calf. A few minutes later Caudan reappeared with the empty pail in his hand. He announced that the dog had finished his meal and that the calf was still busy over his. The German did not understand. "Oh yes," explained Caudan, "the dog lapped up all his milk in three or four gulps."

"And the calf?"

"Oh! he's busy with his bone. . . ."

"You confounded fool!" roared the German. "Are there no calves or dogs in your country?"

"Oh yes, sir," replied Caudan innocently. "Only I have never fed them."

The peasant thought Caudan was too stupid and did not bother to have him punished.

From a professional point of view, the prisoners

despised the Germans for their poor execution of work, for their ignorance of what is meant by work well done, for their absence of taste and lack of initiative. In Germany, when they found that they were entrusted with the more intricate work, such as joining in a furniture factory, mechanical repairs in a garage and on the land, the choice of crops (which incidentally gave them the chance to practise a refined form of sabotage), our workers and peasants realised their gifts of ingenuity and inventiveness—in short, art in work—which are peculiar to their natural genius. Moreover, it was when they realised this that they became the more indignant at having been defeated. "To think we've been beaten by such fools!" they said.

They despised the Germans even more for their fanaticism. The noisy display that so many Nazis made of their national feelings seemed to the prisoners to show a lack of balance and modesty—in other words, a sign of coarseness of soul.

Above all, they despised the Germans for their sheep-like passivity and the gullible way in which they accept any credo. "The most maddening thing of all," said a comrade to me, "is that they are absolutely bent on persuading us that their Holy Hitler is right and that we should endeavour to do something for their New Order. Our replies astound them. But, my God, we're French, we've got logical minds! . . ."

With the growing conviction, in spite of the advice of all realists, that Might is not Right, the prisoners ended by despising the Germans for their 'superiority', the source of which seemed to them to lie simply in the exercise and cult of brutal force. They were certainly impressed by the strength of the Germans—in fact they often felt an inferiority complex in face of it—but, at the same time, they despised the Germans for having no control over them

other than brute force. Without bothering any longer to give the Germans credit for the intelligent will and the prodigious achievements of organisation which had given them the instruments of their power, the prisoners even went so far as to reproach the Germans for their easy victories. "Tanks and dive-bombers against infantry troops! Well, what do you expect?"\*

In the final analysis, what the Kommando prisoner at first disdained, and was then appalled by, was the German scale of values and system of civilisation (which for many was tantamount to the absence of civilisation). And, when we speak of the simple soldiers, we are also thinking of the simplest and the least artificial of them all; for example, the painter Taxil, or the peasant Bouboule. The German ended by becoming to them what the barbarian was to the Athenian, namely a man who, if he is policed, remains the creature of brute force and gregarious passions. This is why, in spite of being tired of the war and in spite of the widespread conviction that this war had been undertaken and conducted in an absurd way by leaders who had not wanted the war, not a single one of them† ever doubted for a moment the justice of the cause for which he endured captivity.

In the face of the German horde they realised that they were supreme individuals: not like the slave who can only oppose his suffering ego to the rest of the world, but like human beings, aware and historically adult, whose dignity as citizens affirmed itself so naturally that it did not seem to be bound up with any particular régime, but rather to pertain to a transcendental citizenship; which even the Germans, in spite of their contempt for democracies,

\*This gave rise to even more bitterness against the pre-war French chiefs, not because they had been unable to win, but because they had not supplied them with the means of winning, nor given them the time to deserve to win.

†Unlike the officers whose confinement in Oflags give rise to perplexing problems.



sometimes ended by appreciating, when they saw how much freedom still lay hidden beneath their subjection.

Naturally, one should not expect to find anything very intellectual or very poetical in their reactions. J. P. Maxence said that the attitude of defeated France was that of a knight; yet when Germans and Frenchmen were brought face to face, whether in France or in Germany, their meeting in no way resembled an ideal encounter between the Paladin Roland and the Warrior Siegfried.

The French prisoners are not knights and do not behave like knights. They behave like country folk, no more; that is to say with all the nobility of which labourers are capable. They endure their wretchedness with despondency, but without fatalism and without counting the cost. They realise instinctively that their real wealth consists not only of their memory of the French way of living, but above all, of their freedom—their mental freedom as well as the political freedom to which they are accustomed, and the splendour of their towns, and the beauty of their hillsides. They remain faithful to themselves, and that is all. Never have Frenchmen shown themselves to be so simple and so true to their ancestral type as during this period of imprisonment in Germany. Thus, in this destitution caused by captivity and in which the texture of one's being is revealed, the French peasants find themselves with the same soul as has been forged through the centuries. They are as detached from any event in their history as they are cut off from the events of 1789 or from the Hundred Years War. Suspicious of pretence at virtue, avoiding gestures and high-sounding words, without cant or baseness—they are simply brothers.

What will they think when they return to their fields or towns? They know very little about France; their wives do not tell them how hungry they are, nor do the Germans tell them how many hostages have been shot.

For months, they have clung to memories of things which, though they do not realise it, exist no longer. They hardly realise that outside their orbit a whole world has died. Will they wish to forget the past and face the new world bravely? Incessantly they turn their thoughts to France. Through her thinkers and poets, as through their own memories, they gaze into the face of France in order to discover the essential things, and they reproach themselves for not having done enough to save her, or even to know her. They reproach themselves in the way one does if one has failed in one's duty to a loved one who has died. Will it suffice for them merely to find themselves, and France again—and their loved ones? Is it possible that they will have no other wish than to sleep in the shade of their own country? And the awareness of their own spiritual value of which they became conscious in Germany—will it not, in the end, only have served to lead them into a facile resignation? They will return, and they will not only have remained excluded from this war for years, but the victory which will set them free will not have been their victory. Apart from escaping, they will not have had the chance to risk anything. Unless, at the last moment, the great uprising of the oppressed causes an internal upheaval in Germany, their utmost bravery will have been nothing more than their own resourcefulness. Will they not remain defeated men? Will they at least be able to shake off the lassitude of these years? Will not captivity have weighed as heavily upon them as the fifty-two months of the last war did on the Old Soldiers of 1918? Will they not be content to be the *Old Prisoners*? And, if this were the case, as one young Frenchman out of every four will have passed through the useless school of deportation, will it not be, in the last resort, France herself—and the spirit of France—which will bear for a long time the stigmata of their slavery? Or, on

the other hand, will they rush into action, to find in misfortune and in the rebirth of France the chance to obtain a glorious revenge and so make of their accumulated contempt and hatred a springboard to great undertakings?

I hesitate to predict the future. Though, somehow or other, I still belong to the prisoners, there is now, between them and me, the gulf of three years—and the width of France. . . . No, this scruple is meaningless. "One should never despair of the spirit," one of the prisoners, a friend of mine—the confidant of my escape—wrote to me recently. I have seen the ideal of a brotherly community develop and realise itself timidly among the prisoners. When, gradually, their confidence has been won back, and their vast and humble hopes and their love, will they not burn to offer these things up? In truth—and this will have been their greatness—never have human beings been fired with a more ardent desire to *give* than these denuded beings. Men of good-will, they are like a troop of the same army as our own army, and they advance isolated in the mist. We do not know how far they are involved in the fight; we only know that their destiny is about to mingle with our own. We are marching towards them. They are our comrades. We are waiting for them.

## VII

### GERMANY AT WAR

OF all the weaknesses which we noticed in the German régime, there is one in particular which I shall mention here, as it has been systematically overlooked by all the conscious and unconscious admirers of Germany and Hitlerism, although it is the most conspicuous of them all:

namely, the unscrupulousness which is to be found wherever fanaticism or discipline has weakened. Above all it manifests itself in the total lack of pride in work well done. Whereas those whose job it is to *organise*, achieve prodigious results through their energy and skill, those who have to carry out the tasks are absolutely lacking in enthusiasm. I will not venture to maintain that the German does not work hard. He works extremely hard, but without conviction and without application. All the prisoners who were employed in industry were appalled to see how far removed the German worker was from the spirit of ancient craftsmanship, how little he bothered to see that his work was well done, or worse still, how little he troubled to learn his trade. The same thing was noticed in agricultural work, among the paid workers. If a French worker or peasant slipped back into the old rhythm of work which was habitual to him in France, he was immediately frowned upon and rebuked by his German fellow-workers as though he had been competing unfairly. So the "~~Schnell, schneller!~~" (fast, faster!) of the foreman, or the sentries, was regularly echoed by whispers of "~~Langsam, langhammer!~~" (slowly, more slowly!) from the paid workers.

In the moral order this unscrupulousness took the form of corruption, so vast that it often amounted to a scandalous lack of civic spirit. Let no one in our presence describe the Reich as having achieved the permanent triumph of virtue. We know too well that no democratic country is nearly so corrupt, nor had so much favouritism, so many compromises and hushed-up scandals. If in the army the officers and men prove their valour every day, in the country itself favouritism of clan and party is widespread. Bribery is rampant, and profiteering is carried on under the cloak of hypocrisy. Moreover, the ideal of a national community is for profiteers

the subject of amused scepticism, while at the same time providing them with the most useful pretexts for their speculations. Every French prisoner knows from experience that every German sentry can be bought, and although as a rule he will not sell much, if he is well paid he will disobey regulations without bargaining. This in a country as highly disciplined as Germany is astounding. I have already spoken of the Schmidt scandal. One has only to read the German newspapers to find out that embezzlements are not confined to prisoner of war camps. When twenty-two Stettin butchers were arrested, at the end of 1940, for having stamped diseased cattle with false stamps and put on sale meat which was unfit for human consumption, they did no harm to Frenchmen—and for a very good reason!

Hitler has been able to suppress all liberty, save that of trafficking at the expense of the community. Now and again the State teaches a lesson. Then roguery is punished in the most atrocious way. A People's Court, which is a blood tribunal, passes death sentences. The Schmidt affair ended in suicides and decapitations. A woman guilty of having exchanged a woollen waistcoat for some woollen underwear belonging to the Winter Help Organisation was decapitated. Similarly, the worker who slackens on the Labour Front is judged like a military deserter; every striker is executed. A nursemaid aged nineteen was executed in Schilswig because she left, without permission, the crèche of which she was in charge.

Such is the law of dictatorships. Hitler could only impose his power by creating a new privileged class, which was all the more tempted to traffic in influence because in practice it was irresponsible. And as recourse to punishment has always been the final and inevitable expedient of tyrants, harshness increases as difficulties are multiplied. By the grace of Hitler, the Germans inside

Germany may still expect butcheries compared with which the famous night of June 30th will be no more than a harmless reckoning of accounts.

But in spite of this, to count on a German collapse which would save us the necessity to fight to the end, would be utopian. First of all because the military and industrial power of Germany is still enormous, but even more because of the real nature of the spirit of Nazi Germany.

Germany has one aim, which is that of establishing her hegemony by reducing all other nations either to impotence or to slavery. This aim is not that of Hitler alone. Whoever has dwelt beyond the Rhine since the Armistice of June 1940 can have no doubt on this point.

As regards France, the admitted and unanimous aim is not to enslave her—the Germans know how vigorous is her national individuality—but to reduce her to the rank of a third-class power. As we were told by the interpreter who received us at the fortress of Mainz—a man who had lived long in France and was as western as a German can be—"If we reduce your frontiers to those of 1648, we will be doing no more than marching with History: do not forget, gentlemen, that Lyons is an ancient city of the Empire." It may well be that the average German has not got 'territorial ambitions' in the west. But for all that, he considers Alsace-Lorraine and Flanders as Germanic soil, and if in addition he makes no claim for Germany over Burgundy and Franche-Comté, as the review *Die Woche* once did, it is out of pure kindness of heart.

As regards the Poles, the will to enslave them is in the very marrow of the whole German nation. Right from the start the S.S., the police, and the simple farmers of Pomerania, all reacted in the same way. Over this

inferior race the Herrenvolk has every right! On the road to Jachen men and women in tatters scurry along under the cudgel blows of the German police. They are Polish peasants. At Pleken and at Souvalki, children are forced into Kommando work, watched by guards—armed with rifles and whips, and obliged each morning to break the ice of the drinking-troughs with crowbars. They are paying for the crime of being born Polish, and they are nine years old. "Work, Pole, a slave thou art, a slave thou wilt remain!" Simply because the population of Grabowo-Ostrolenka is *surplus*, the locality was occupied by the Gestapo, on December 10th 1940, at eight o'clock in the morning, and the inhabitants were ordered to leave their fields, their houses and their cattle within half an hour, with the right to take no more than 60 lbs of luggage per family. When the half-hour was over, men, women, and children were shut up in a church and left there for two days without any food whatsoever; then they were put on open lorries, at a temperature of twenty-five degrees below zero, and hurried off to the general government. Numbers of children died of cold and hunger and their mothers carried their little corpses in their arms.

Thus the will to enslave and to dominate is not theoretical, but perfectly conscious, and, what is more serious, there are considerable spiritual forces which contribute to its realisation. Yes, the camp of free men who claim a monopoly of spiritual values should realise that spiritual forces also work in Hitler's favour. One may hold these forces to be demoniac, but one must have the courage not to underestimate them.

There is no need to recall that Hitlerism in Germany is not an absolutely artificial product. Every German, whatever the degree of his belief or disbelief in the régime, adheres with an intellectual or sentimental adhesion—it matters little which—to one of the elements in the make-

up of Nazism, if only because the latter has assimilated the chief German traditions and has been able to make of them an incoherent amalgam which still holds good. It is not by chance that the new religion looks back both to Nietzsche (the Will to Power) and to Goethe, the European. . . . The whole of Germany's past has been permanently mobilised behind Hitler. An astounding sleight of hand has harmonised the tradition of the barbarous warrior, the destroyer of western civilisation, and that of the flower of romanticism with its procession of dreams in the shade of the linden-trees. I leave it to the specialists to show to what extent Hitlerism flows with the stream of German philosophy, starting from Fichte and Hegel, and leading to Vaihinger, the philosopher of the 'as if' (for instance, 'as if it were true').

Of course there are some things which are too manifestly *not* in accord with tradition, and which could scarcely be justified by reason of lineage. The German people have been made to swallow these by ten years of propaganda. At one time I used to have conversations with a young Nazi of twenty who was deeply convinced. One day, when he wanted to justify in my eyes the practice of sterilisation, he said to me: "Do you realise that in sparing these wretched people descendants, the community saves at least thirteen hundred marks a year?" And as I seemed to him reticent he added: "Listen! When I was thirteen our schoolmaster used to take us once a month to visit the lunatic asylum. It's there that I understood the depth of our Fuhrer's convictions." On that occasion I thought it useless to pursue the conversation.

However this may be, it would be a great mistake to think of Hitlerism as an unforeseen virus inoculated by a lunatic into a healthy organism. At the time when we were prisoners the Germans did not need to be bludgeoned



to cry "Heil Hitler!" We know very well that the citizens of the Reich are shut in by intolerable obligations and prohibitions, and that there are certain places, namely Buchan Wald and Dachau, where residence is not attractive. Nevertheless in the Germany we saw, though fear sometimes showed itself, terror was not very noticeable. On the contrary, what struck us time and again during the period between the defeat of France and the beginning of the Russian campaign—the period when without doubt German morale was at its height—was fanaticism, particularly amongst the youth. I will give two examples.

We go back to my trip through Königsberg at the beginning of 1941. Everywhere, cluttering the public places, I saw young men drunk with pride and strutting vainly in their uniforms: variegated uniforms, sumptuous in their stiffness; high military caps with silver bands on the varnished peak; greatcoats with large lapels, sometimes frogged and looped; daggers at their side, or short swords with silver tassels! They went about, loud of tongue and too confident of gesture, like perhaps—but for their teutonic arrogance—those twenty-year old lieutenants who followed Napoleon over all the battlefields of Europe and who, in their exaltation of youth and victory, also believed that the world belonged to them.

But I knew that they had about them something more than the sprightliness of young males, for I had in my mind another memory which came from the French campaign. It was on June 11th 1940, and the Germans were trying to force their way across the Marne. Our attackers, very young soldiers, who came from Germany on foot and who had only received their baptism of fire the week before, leapt forward to the assault all day long under the fire of our machine-guns and never ceased to sing.

I must needs bear witness that in 1940 and 1941 a great enthusiasm animated the youth of Germany and that like every enthusiasm it begot joy.

The youth of Germany thought it had found a reason for living. After the *mal de siècle* of the years 1920 to 1930, it thought it was realising its mission. Efforts had been made to inoculate it with the sentiment of its social function—the youth camps and the labour service both tended to this end. Since then war had obliged those in charge to hand over responsibilities even to children. I have seen fifteen-year-old Nazis brought from Germany in lorries and entrusted with the policing of the streets and roadways at Givet and in places neighbouring on the Franco-Belgian frontier. And this happened from June 15th onwards, when traces of the fighting were still visible on every house and the question of France laying down arms had not yet been raised. Could these boys have failed for a moment to take themselves seriously?

What more conclusive evidence could be found of the exaltation of the fighting men after the first war? Before their first winter in Russia, how could their difficulties seem other than light to them? To have crossed Europe without warning, to have entered as conquerors in ten capitals, to be taking part in an epic drama in a century which until then had been thought of as prosaic—all this was indeed enough to efface, even in minds less docile to Hitlerism, the taste for free thought and the love of justice.

How could they fail to think themselves heroes, when each day they heard loud voices calling to them: "By you the face of the earth shall be changed for a thousand years!" When they saw (as I myself have witnessed) the motor-cyclists of the Feldpost distributing their mail on the battlefield itself, in a village where there was still house to house fighting? When they took enemy generals prisoner and forced the highest of them to salute the least

of their lieutenants? And how should they fail to think themselves especially deserving of love, when they returned on leave to their homes and felt the admiration of the young plaited Gretchens mounting towards them like incense? Is it not understandable that the war caused these fanatics to love more passionately the Leader thanks to whom they had learnt to love themselves?

All the newspapers of the Reich reproduced by the million the picture which won the award at the German Art Exhibition of 1940-41. It showed Hitler, wrapped in a billowing cloak and with a Prussian cap on his head, striding, huge and sombre, before a still more sombre background of Wagnerian clouds. "The new Parsifal!" I heard someone say, and that astounding statement was not made by a young idiot, but by a poor old woman from Munich whose two sons were away with the armies.

Furthermore, I think that, when estimating the German morale, one is apt to overlook a new mental factor which substantially dates from this war—and this is *interest*. To-day the Germans are united behind their Fuhrer as much by a coalition of interests as by a coalition of beliefs.

First of all, from top to bottom of the social ladder people learnt, after the French Armistice, that conquest *pays*—or that it can be made to pay. The spirit of looting is contagious. 'Germany Limited' knows that it is tied up with profits. The two Marks a day which the occupying soldier gets paid in France are only paid on account. The replacement, in all heavy labour, of Germans by prisoners of war is only beginning. Public opinion visualises a Roman kind of world, whose only universalism would be that of a servitude in which the nations divide the toil and sweat, while the wealth of the world flows towards the 'chosen' country. The dominating race, surfeited, not by bread and circuses, but by meat and parades, would

at last experience the greatness which has been its obsession since the days of the Emperor Barabossa. Sad is the result of a demagogy of the slums, applied to a whole country! Descendant of notorious pillagers, the warrior escapes from the boundaries of his own country and, in his mind's eye, sees before him a vista of fertile plains under the sun, and dreams of English breakfasts, and splendid farms in Alsace and in the Ukraine. To-morrow, there will be no more thankless work, no more problems of selling the Mercedes-Benz in far-away India; no more care for the future of the children, for there will be scarcely enough little Germans for all the key-jobs in the New Europe!

Look at this Pomeranian peasant called Schmidt or Müller: he is neither better nor worse than another. He venerates Napoleon. He was in the last war, and then returned to cultivate his land, cursing 'Wilhelm'. As his sons and his farm-hands are in the army, the Führer has allotted him instead a Frenchman and two Poles. Thus he understands that he belongs to a master-race. He no longer works, he makes others work for him. And when, at the beginning, he wondered how to give commands, he quite naturally recalled the time when he was a soldier. So, when speaking to 'his prisoners', he adopted the voice of his Feldwebel, the perpetual barking which terrified him when he was himself a recruit. But sometimes this peasant makes a kind gesture. At Christmas, he may offer a cigar to 'his' Frenchman, but not to the Poles: they belong to an altogether inferior race. But one day it snows so heavily that the prisoners break off their work. Schmidt, or Müller, as the case may be, is annoyed. He wants to get the beetroots in, and he resents this refusal to work as a personal insult. The police send two S.S. men. The S.S. men shut themselves up in a barn with each of the prisoners in turn. The farmer is behind the

door. He hears cries coming from the barn. Do not expect him to have tender feelings. "My beetroots will be got in," he says, under his breath, adding: "One must be hard."

Now may I present to you the 'Captain's wife'. The Gnädige Frau loves nature. When she was fifteen she read Hölderlin with intoxication, and it would surely bring tears to her eyes to see, as I did, her husband, who is Second in Command of a Stalag, beat up a prisoner while insisting that the unhappy man remained at attention. But the Captain's wife is happy to see, day by day, a Polish civilian—bearing on his chest the violet and yellow P which is the mark of Polish servitude—mow her lawn and prune her pear-trees. She does not speak to him (does a great Lord speak to his minions?) She does not concern herself because he has a wife and children, separated from him by perhaps eight hundred miles. She merely appreciates, as one of the advantages and benefits of the régime, the homage paid to her by the Kommandantur in the form of this slave, who is docile and oh! how discreet! What she does not suspect is that the mowing of her lawn and the cudgelling of a prisoner are complementary facts forming part of the same cycle of slavery and force. For all hangs together, and the brutality of the Captain contributes, without his knowledge, to the happiness of his wife, who does not realise this either.

Furthermore, for every German who is not a dead cell in the midst of a very living organism, Hitler's victorious campaign means the victory of Germany and consequently his own victory; while on the contrary, for any German who has hopes in life, opposition to Hitler means defeating his own interests. For better or worse, eighty million Germans have thrown in their lot with Hitler. With the exception of a handful of communists, no one in Germany can offer any alternative to National

Socialism; and having disposed of communism, Hitler has exhausted all the reserves of political imagination in his people, just as he has absorbed all their reserves of hope. For Germany, defeat can only bring with it destructive revolution—unless, indeed, it were to result in a new Weimar, with beer, for example, at thirty billion marks a pint, and the sons of the junkers trafficking in cocaine. Is it not natural that people should trust in the promises of Dr Ley—which are cheap and not to be redeemed for some time to come? In this way all sorts of conservative forces more or less support the established order.

And so it happens that, even if enthusiasm wanes, there are ‘interests’, whether conscious or not, from one end of Germany to the other, which share this complicity. How many can escape from it? And how is one to recognise them? What sort of discrimination is possible between one lot and another? Above all I am conscious that the *same* men are capable of acting both as heroes and as assassins: under my very eyes they forced Lieutenant C—— to march before them towards our own troops, and then offered us innocently—to him who had survived this horrible adventure and to me—half their bread; but yet, a few hours later, they seized Lieutenant Fournier-Foch, grandson of Maréchal Foch, separated him from the other officers present, and forced him with a revolver at the nape of his neck to mount a cattle-van where they locked him in along with sixty-five soldiers.

I have had in Germany friendships which I do not renounce; yet I say that to attempt to make distinctions between Germans is just as fallacious as the belief in an early revolution which would, without further effort on our part, put an end to the war. A revolution can take place in Germany, and will do so, I am convinced, when the Germans are reduced to acknowledging their conqueror. But I doubt the possibility as long as the fanaticism, or

at least the resolution, of the youth is still active and the calculations of interest have not proved empty. And as the Germans are much more conscious of the 'cosmic' importance of the issues involved than were the French in 1810 or 1814, the preliminary conditions for this revolution have not yet been realised.

But for all that, a spring too far stretched is bound to snap. In the past, each advance made by Germany has been a Titanic effort finally embracing only emptiness. Once more the Germans have been made to realise that twenty 'victories' which are always being challenged do not lead to the final victory. The war as it has lengthened has substituted for the victors' superiority complex *the psychosis of the impossible victory*. In the end it will bring about, suddenly, the collapse of Germany's spiritual forces, but not before the day on which—the German cities having crumbled one after the other under allied bombs—the German soldier will search the sky in vain for an aeroplane with the black cross, as we, in June 1940, searched for an aeroplane bearing the red, white and blue; the day when finally the armies which took Vienna, Prague, Warsaw, Copenhagen, Oslo, the Hague, Brussels, Paris, Belgrade, Athens, Kief and Karkhov, now decimated on the plains of Russia, will clash, both in the east and in the west, in hopeless conflict with the armies of Liberation.

## PART TWO

### THE ADVENTURES OF THE 186

#### I

#### WE BREAK LOOSE

WHY did we decide to escape? What made us make up our minds? Some of us escaped out of a sense of duty or honour, others for the simple reason that they were prisoners. Some were inspired by a spirit of adventure, others by love or by hatred. But in each case it was because we longed to see France again—the free France of our dreams. Whatever our motives were, there came a day for each of us when we said “No” to the Germans.

When a prisoner says to himself for the first time: “Supposing I were to escape?” he’s like a man who says: “Supposing I had a million pounds?” But what a long way from the birth of the idea of escape to its fulfilment! The best men knew, from the very start, that they would escape. Colonel Billotte and Deschamps, for example, never had a moment’s hesitation; and Auzary was already proposing escape to his friend Boissieu when they were still on their way to Germany. Yet escape is like an act of faith: with some people it is an automatic reflex of the mind, with others it is something to be thought out carefully over a period of time. This is why the idea of escaping, and then the actual decision to escape, represent an initial victory over oneself, over the lies of Germany and the silence of France.

Once you have conceived the idea of escaping you have to let your mind grow used to it, and realise just what it implies. You ponder over it at night when you lie awake, and the thought of it even begins to haunt your dreams.



You have to break the mental chains of passivity which have bound you since the disastrous defeat. You have to fight against being numbed by the daily routine. Just think of the Frenchman's dilemma during the first months after the armistice! In the first place, the mere idea of escape was far-fetched, if you were just a quiet middle-class Frenchman or a peasant used to living peacefully, or 'nicely', as Taxil puts it. Then there was Maréchal Pétain watching over you like a kind old grandfather—and besides, the war was over! "Do not be foolhardy!" That is what everyone said to you, especially your own people. "Are you really so wretched? Are you not getting your letters regularly or almost regularly? And is your wife not getting her allowance? Anyway, you will be seeing her again in no time! Perhaps on August 15th, certainly on November 15th, or for Christmas at the latest. And if you are not set free at Christmas, well . . . you will go home at Easter!" It was only when Easter had come and gone that you stopped waiting for Trinity Sunday!

First you were misled by promises, then you were blackmailed by threats. Every member of *Trait d'Union* contained a paragraph in large print saying: "French prisoners, you are warned that although an escaped prisoner caught in Germany is only lightly punished, if he is recaptured in France he lays himself open to punishment of the most rigorous kind." In some camps the Germans spread the rumour that the family of a young Belgian who escaped to England had had their ration books confiscated. If you escaped, were you not exposing your own family to similar reprisal measures? And supposing you had left a wife and children in Paris, whom the Germans would hold as hostages? If the proximity of the Russian frontier was a tempting factor for the prisoner, there were literally hundreds of people in East Prussia

who would say to him: "As soon as you step across the Russian border, the Red soldiers will shoot you and throw your naked body over the barbed wire into 'No man's land'. It happened only last week, near Memel. . . ." Besides, when all was said and done, repatriation was so much simpler than escaping, especially if you felt called to the vocation of male nurse, or policeman, or customs official, or if you were a friend of Monsieur Scapini's! "Apart from the glory of escaping, repatriation is so much more intelligent!" as one of our comrades used to say.

If, in spite of all this, the prisoner is determined to escape and tries to think of a way of doing so, he is faced with a vista of worries. Before escaping, he has to guard against indiscretion; afterwards, he will have to guard against betraying himself by his appearance. He knows only too well that an escaped prisoner is easier to spot than an escaped gangster whose picture is posted up at every street corner. The only clothes he has are his uniform. With few exceptions he does not know the language. (Out of the 186, only five could speak German well enough not to give themselves away when they opened their mouths.) Finally, he cannot expect any help from the Germans, no matter what their political convictions. Either through fear, or from a sense of duty, not only would they refuse to help him, but would denounce him mercilessly. Even the most attractive cavalry officer could not aspire to being a new Fabricio del Dongo and carry off the prison commander's daughter. If a prisoner escapes, he has to disappear only to appear again on foreign soil; he has to make a kind of dark and silent tunnel for himself through the German ant-heap, and both its outlets are carefully guarded! Besides, he has no equipment, no identity card, no compass, no money, and often no supplies of food. He does not know the exact

position of the frontier, and at any step on his journey he might take the wrong road, or run into someone, or find the police dog on his tracks—and it would be all up with him!

Every French prisoner in Germany knows of cases of brutality or personal vengeance against prisoners who have been recaptured. The German authorities make a point of denying them, but this does not put an end to them. Grillet, for example, was recaptured near the frontier on his first attempt at escape (he only succeeded in his third attempt). He and his companion were tightly tied up from head to foot and thrown into a lorry which brought them back to Königsberg. It was in the very beginning of winter and the night was icy cold. When they reached the camp, at one o'clock in the morning, the sentries untied them and made them stand up. Grillet's companion collapsed because his feet were frozen. Grillet, who had stood the journey better, was taken off to the office, where he was beaten up by eight Germans who tried to make him confess how he had obtained his civilian clothes. Then they shut him in refectory to rest for three hours. After this they put a haversack, filled with lead, on his back, a Russian cap on his head, and a piece of wood shaped like a gun over his shoulder. In this get-up he was made to walk from one end of the camp to the other, barefoot in the snow, from six in the morning till six at night. He was given no food and was only allowed to stop every two hours to be cross-questioned again about his civilian clothing.

You had to close your mind to such things if you decided to escape. That was the first step to freedom. Sooner or later each one of us had to make up his mind, but very few remember at what precise moment they did so—though it was from that moment that they began to be free. You began to be free long before you escaped;

thus there are escapers who never finish their escape, just as there are poets who never finish a poem.

Once you have made the decision you become a new being and you live, eat and sleep with one end in view: your escape! You are obsessed with the thought of it, although you daren't breathe a word to anyone except your accomplices. You are consumed with feverish excitement and yet you must keep calm at all costs. When you walk up and down the camp discussing your plans with your accomplice, you look around furtively to see that no one suspects what you are up to. You treasure your money, the money for your journey, like a miser, and you are torn between keeping it on you or hiding it away. You dread 'de-lousings' because your things may be searched in your absence. You go through lengthy negotiations to secure a top bunk, the safest—and even then you keep feeling your mattress to make sure that the compass which you concealed in it is still there. If you have not managed to get hold of the cap you need for your escape you can think of nothing else and spend the whole night wondering how to get it. One moment you are in high spirits, the next you are down in the dumps. Every evening you have long confabulations with your accomplice in another hut, and you are never both in the same mood.

One of you turns up very dejected and says: "It's no good, old man, we will never get away!"

"What! But I have found a cap," replies the other triumphantly, "of course we are leaving!"

"Yes, but what about my belt-buckle?"

And he goes back sadly to bed. The next day he turns up radiantly happy: he has managed to make a buckle out of a piece of old tin and a piece of cloth. He is so cheerful that he sings with joy as he digs his tunnel.

Whether one was anxious, or optimistic, or silent and

inscrutable, as long as one was considering and preparing an escape one was a happy man. Life was worth while!

Even if all the prisoners did not experience these excitements and worries, every one of them felt silent joy and a leaping heart when at last they could say: "This is my last day of slavery, my last day of anxiety, my last day as a prisoner." At the actual moment of departure, everyone knew just what he was risking: this was a real act of free will! At that moment one made a clean break between the past and the future: the slave rose up to strike off his fetters, and the Frenchman who had lost France was about to become a free Frenchman again.

The last moment, when one picked up one's bundle and said: "It is time to be off!" was a solemn moment for everyone, no matter how improvised one's preparations had been. I remember stopping for a moment, just as I was setting out, to take a last look at the camp which was covered in snow: I felt deeply moved as I thought of the gravity of the man who was so helpful to me, and who was staying behind in Germany to carry on work which so many others would have abandoned.

Beuchot has described to me how Lemoine and Simon left. It was in the middle of the night, on a farm in East Prussia. Beuchot was asleep on the floor with other prisoners. Suddenly he was awakened with a start by the sound of a scuffle and muffled voices. He sat up. An angry voice whispered: "Shut up! Don't turn on the lights!" It was Simon. The bars of the window were already undone, and there were forms outlined against the sky. Beuchot, breathless with amazement, watched his friends climb out and disappear into the night. He turned over in his bunk and lay awake until the morning. In the rising sun he could see a flannel belt still hanging from the window and flapping about like a white flag. Beuchot said that again and again he would wake up in

the night and think he was watching the selfsame scene. Six months later, he himself escaped.

Beaujouan, the woodcutter, made up his mind to escape, at the eleventh hour. I can imagine his feelings: Gauthier had just said good-bye to his friends, and was walking out through the door, when Beaujouan rushed up to him and said: "I am ready, I am leaving with you."

The escape I find most delightful is Taxil's; he is a good sensible fellow, whose one ambition is to rear rabbits after the war, near Draguignan, and to play bowls under the shady plane-trees of a village green. Taxil was one of the first to reach Russia, on August 1st 1940. "I left in full daylight," he says (and you should hear his lovely Provençal accent). "I was about a mile from the frontier. I said to my sergeant: 'I am taking my haversack and I am going to try to escape. I don't say I will succeed, but I am going to try!'" The Germans were not far off and the sentry was behind a house with his dog. Then he adds with his charming naïveté, which is as often ironical as not: "One must be brave! I said to myself: I have only to run a mile . . ."

I like to think that it was at this moment, and with these words, that Taxil won the medal for Escaped Prisoners, which General de Gaulle pinned on his breast.

## II

### WE ARE ESCAPED PRISONERS

**W**E escaped by various means: some by underground tunnels, others by climbing through windows, others by sawing through the door with a penknife, others by making a hole in the wall without awaking the sentry. Some walked across a room in which a German was snoring,

and some just walked out by the main entrance to the camp, under the very noses of their guards. Some spent fifteen nights tramping through ceaseless rain, others were pursued by men and dogs and had to hide in ponds till morning. Some crossed whole provinces on foot through snow and wearing only clogs, and some swam across rivers in which ice was floating. Some went on escaping even after their comrades had been shot at their side, and there were also a few whose escape was as simple and quiet, but for the risk, as a motor drive in the woods of Meudon is for a Parisian!

Naturally each escape varied according to the route the prisoner took, according to his temperament and whether he set off from an Oflag, or a Stalag, or one of the various labour camps or simply from a farm; and according to whether he had to cross the whole of Germany or just walk a couple of miles to reach the Russian frontier. It would be difficult to supply a stock recipe for escaping from a prisoner of war camp, but our experiences were so varied that we can provide examples of every kind of escape: scientific, cranky, sporting, ecstatic, violent, cunning, tragic, comic, bloody, and even one, involuntary!

Our means of transport varied considerably during those eleven months of escapes, from July 1st 1940, when Fauvelle and Gaud reached the Russian frontier on bicycles, only eight days after the signing of the Armistice, to June 5th 1941, which was the eve of Germany's attack on Russia. There were escapes on foot, by bicycle, by swimming, by car, by boat and by train. No one escaped by plane, though Vaudreuil and Buisson seriously considered the possibility of doing so.

The hero of the escape by car is Berdot. In civilian life he works in a slaughter-house. He was born in Carcas-sonne and he is an amusing talker. His Kommando work

consisted in being assistant to an important butcher in the Eastern Provinces. When Berdot had got into the butcher's good books, nothing was simpler for him than to make off discreetly with the delivery van in order to deliver it himself to the Russian sentries at the frontier. Alas! when he was only seven miles or so from the frontier he ran into a police barrage and was stopped. He was taken back to the Stalag in the same van, though no longer at the wheel. After Berdot had spent forty days in the detention room, his butcher, who bore him no ill-will, asked to have him back if he promised not to pinch the van again! "And I should certainly have promised him this," says Berdot, "because next time I'd have gone off by bicycle." Unfortunately the Kommandantur did not allow him to go back to work, and Berdot, much to his shame, had to escape on foot.

The ones who escaped by boat have stayed in Russia. There were four of them. One day they were busy unloading a boat full of gravel on the shore of the frontier river. Their guards, who were used to the slow way in which the German navvies did this work, went off for a trip in their boat, confident that nothing would go wrong. The four Frenchmen began to empty the boat as fast as they could, jumped into it, and heaved it off into the current with a pole. They had not got far from the bank when they heard an engine chugging. It was their guards' motor-boat making straight for them at full speed. It was too late to turn back. An unequal race, but a far more exhilarating one than any Oxford and Cambridge boat-race, followed. Two of the fugitives rowed with the oars, another used a pole, and the fourth rowed with a spade. The motor-boat was only a few lengths behind them, and the foreman was standing up in the prow shouting and shaking his fists. Just as their boat was being overtaken, the Frenchmen reached the Russian bank. The Germans



were afraid to land, or to fire on the prisoners. The slave-drivers had lost the race!

Our long-distance champion had a no less remarkable trip. His name is Trarbach and he's a man who has knocked about all over the world. His speciality was escaping alone in a goods-train. During his first attempt he set out from Bremen and finished up in a town called Munchen, where he was arrested. He was amazed when he learnt from us, six months later, that München was Munich and that he'd crossed Germany from north to south! His second attempt makes him blush: he never got beyond Osnabruck. The third attempt was successful. He calmly chose his goods van at the marshalling yards in Bremen. Naturally he ran into far more people than he'd expected, and after having had to hide under a train, he came out and walked straight into a German! He took to his heels and fled, and a chase worthy of a Charlie Chaplin film followed, among the goods vans. Finally, with Germans close on his heels, he spotted a van marked Leningrad, jumped into it, and hid under the tarpaulin. Thus he started on his journey to Russia.

No journey could have been more uncomfortable. Trarbach made himself at home among the crates, and thought it would not last more than five or six days—but the trip lasted fifteen! After the first week he allowed himself one piece of bread every twenty-four hours. On the tenth day his supplies gave out. Luckily the sky provided him with water. Storms broke out and the rain-water collected in the folds of the black and greasy tarpaulin which covered him. He cut little slits with a razor blade and drank the water which trickled through—but it was poisonous, and he got a fever which made his legs and ankles swell up to an enormous size. After a while he could hardly move and he fell into a kind of delirium.

Suddenly, without realising that the train had stopped,

he was awakened by the violent jolting of the van. The tarpaulin was torn off, and his eyes were dazzled by a stream of light. As soon as he could see properly he noticed that the men were wearing Russian caps and that they bore the insignia of the hammer and sickle. He was in Russia! He was hauled out of the van and carried, rather than led, by Russian sentries to the near-by station. These men were the frontier guards. To his horror Trarbach caught sight of two German railway officials in full uniform. He thought he was going to be sent back to Hitler, and began begging the Russian to keep him. They couldn't understand what he was saying. "Nicht Deutschland! Nicht Deutschland!" he implored.

But they weren't sending him back. They were merely going through the formalities of filling in the usual customs forms for his delivery, since both the Russians and the Germans were anxious to safeguard themselves. When the German station-master returned to Eydkau, he was the bearer of a curious receipt: "Delivered: French soldiers, one unit"!

Obviously it was not everyone's lot to escape in such a painful if so original a way, and not many of us could have displayed such cunning and such perseverance. In fact there is a Frenchman among us who proves that at least in one case escaping required no initiative at all. This man's name is Testeil, otherwise known as 'Fromageol'. Re-enacting the old legend of the maiden who was carried off by a bull, Testeil let himself be carried off by a cow.

His story begins like a fairy-tale: Once upon a time there was a cowherd, a herd of cattle and a frontier. . . . In other words the Russian frontier formed the boundary of the field in which Testeil grazed his cows; and this frontier, like the frontiers one hears about in ancient legends, was only marked by a ditch. Testeil, much im-

pressed by his boss's daily accounts of Russian atrocities, was still wondering whether to jump across the ditch or not. For the time being he only ventured to put a foot in Russia now and again, or just his heels, and to urinate on to Germany: this did his heart good. One fine day, however, a cow, which had been stung by a tarantula, violated the Russian frontier. Fromageol waited for five whole minutes. At only a stone's-throw from her fatherland, the cow was placidly chewing a delicious Soviet bush. After giving the matter careful consideration, the conscientious cowherd decided to fetch his cow. "If I have to stay on the other side," he said to himself, "it will mean that it is heaven's will that I should escape." And he crossed the ditch. He had only taken two steps on the Russian side when three huge men appeared from behind a hedge, grabbed him, and laid him flat on his back. While one of them pointed his bayonet at Testeil's navel, another fired several shots into the air. These huge men were Russian soldiers.

The shots, as intended by the Russians, promptly brought a Nazi frontier guard to the scene. The new arrival knew no more Russian than the Russians knew German, but as soon as he laid eyes on the Frenchman lying in that curious position, he began to shout and gesticulate: "Komm! Franzose. Komm! Komm!"—"Niet," replied the Russians, very politely, still pointing a bayonet at Tertails tummy. "Komon! Komon!" the German insisted. In the end, as the comedy could not continue in this fashion, they decided to cut the pear in two, so to speak: the Russians returned the cow but kept Testeil. That's how it came about that Testeil is now a soldier under de Gaulle. And would you believe it, he volunteers for all the dangerous missions!

I almost hesitated to tell this story, for it's enough to make anyone who went through hell in order to escape,

green with envy, if it doesn't make him laugh. Such is luck: the most unforeseen and unpremeditated escape succeeds, whereas one that has been carefully planned out may fail!

In spite of Testeil's experience, it is an extremely difficult thing to escape from a country at war. The snag is usually quite different from the kind one would have expected, but none the less awkward. Figures prove the truth of this. "Where can one escape to, without two to one odds against succeeding!" wrote Monsieur Louis Thomas, who thought it safer not to try to escape himself, and preferred to be repatriated, a fact which doubtless explains his *pétiniste* ardour.

Out of two million French prisoners, only one hundred and eighty-six succeeded in reaching England via Russia. The proportion strikes one as even smaller when one realises that only thirteen escaped from the centre of Germany, and the first long-distance attempt (by this I mean covering more than two hundred and fifty miles) to escape dates from January 1941. Moreover, those who succeeded in this attempt were the first Frenchmen not only of their camp—which consisted of forty-three thousand men—but of the whole of Pomerania, to set foot in a neutral country. And when Captain Billotte left Oflag 2D in February 1941 for good, it was only after ten preceding attempts from the same camp of six thousand officers had failed; and during the eight months which followed his escape the only other two men from this camp to succeed in escaping were Boissieu and Grelot. The chances of success were one in three or four if you were near the frontier, but only one in fifteen or twenty if you were more than seventy-five miles from the frontier. Out of the five groups among us who had to cover more than one hundred miles on foot, only one lot arrived complete: Cast-

aigne, Tuyaret, Largarie; in the others, only one man succeeded in each group, namely, Armand, Boutoul, Berthier and Grillet. Seven of us, Deschamps, Graven, Grillet, Carpentier, Périgois, Berdot and Trarbach had already made one, two or even three abortive attempts before succeeding.

No wonder, therefore, that our thoughts often go out to those who failed in their attempt, and to those who will never see France again because they met a bullet and lie buried in the marshes of the East, or to those who lost their lives along the blood-stained Russo-German frontier, and those whom we saw returning to the camp between two sentries and who were just as deserving of success as anyone. I am thinking of that admirable young Second Lieutenant Rosàre, who was the first to get away from Oflag 2D all alone and without breathing a word to anyone; he left on August 15th 1940, and was only recaptured near Halle, when he was worn out with exhaustion and hunger. I am thinking of Auclair, who was caught at the station of Königsberg; of Captain Tournon and Lieutenant Loret, who with hardly any money, got as far as Bingenbrück on the Rhine, travelling by goods van; of the soldier who travelled locked up in a van full of potatoes from Stettin to Dijon, was recaptured only about seven miles from the unoccupied zone, and sent back to Pomerania; and of the soldier who reached Paris, saw the houses and heard the familiar sounds, and was caught just as he was leaving the Gare de l'Est. I am also thinking of those three twenty-year-old officers, Saintrap, Gutfin and Perlmutter, who escaped on Christmas Eve and were hounded down by German police dogs on the frontier, after having covered about three hundred and fifty miles and when they could already see the Soviet sentries a few score yards ahead.

One need only add up the number of failures to realise

how dangerous and difficult it was to escape. A hundred and thirty or forty of us were only one day's walk, or at most, two or three days from the frontier: nevertheless they had to prepare their escape just as carefully as if they had been in Schleswig or in Saxony. Except for those who were able to leave by daylight, while they were on farm work, or because they were able to hide in the lavatory while the Germans were locking up their huts for the night, everyone had to escape from a camp or a prison, or at least from a locked dormitory, or from behind barbed wire.

Once you were out in the open your freedom was still precarious. It was from then on that your struggle with man and nature began, even if you were quite close to the frontier. You could only walk at night, you were on edge and on the watch the whole time. The mere sound of a dog barking forced you to alter your course, and the sight of a passer-by made you lie flat on the ground. During daylight you took cover as best you could, and at night you went on through all weathers, knowing or hoping that the reward was freedom.

The cold was a terrible handicap. Autumn sets in very early on the Russian border, and from mid-September onwards the nights are icy. In East Prussia, October and November bring the great west winds which blow from the Baltic: at this time of year the bleak plain is agonising. Then comes winter, which starts in the middle of November or the beginning of December according to the region. At Christmas the temperature is often twenty-five degrees below freezing point. January and February are the coldest months, when the heaviest snow falls. The rivers only begin to thaw towards the end of February, and the lakes and marshes only in the middle of March. Finally comes the spring with endless mud. Well, half of the prisoners escaped between November 15th and March

15th. This means that even those who were closest to the Russian frontier had to walk through snowstorms and bitter frost. They had to wrap their shoes in rags in order to prevent themselves from slipping on the ice, and they kept stubbing their toes against solid lumps of ice, or sinking up to their thighs in fresh snow, and could only calm their feverish thirst by sucking icicles. Monier, Taylor and Clément swam across the Narev just before it froze. Their clothes froze stiff on their bodies when they got out of the water. Poily, Faivre and ten others escaped during the spring thaws, when the ice on the lakes and canals was so thin that they had to crawl on all fours, and in spite of their precautions they had more cold baths in their three days of escaping than they'd had warm baths during nine month's captivity. Even if you had to drag yourself only for a couple of miles on your stomach through the snow, in order to cross the frontier, you had paid dearly for freedom.

Moreover when, with immense difficulty, you had approximately reached the frontier, your fate still hung in the balance. You had to find the actual frontier line, and this was often more difficult than getting out of the camp.

Sometimes the frontier was marked by a river, which simplified matters. Many of us were only separated from Russia by the Narev. Although they were not always good swimmers, and the river was about sixty yards wide, many threw themselves in and swam across. Three of them, Henri, Béghin and Louis Renaud, were exhausted and got cramp while swimming; only a miracle saved them. Poor Renaud let go of his bundle of clothing in mid-river, and was fished out on to the Russian bank stark naked.

When there was no river to mark the whereabouts of the frontier, how on earth could one tell its position or

how it was guarded? There was often no place to hide in this bleak and open country, which in winter looks like the Siberian desert, with just a few birch-trees or a pine-forest here and there. Sometimes there was barbed wire along the frontier, and sometimes nothing to mark the line of demarcation, and sometimes there were five or six rows of barbed wire. . . . However could one tell if one had got to the frontier or beyond it? And the frontier was always patrolled by armed sentries and soldiers: you would see a light and hear dogs barking in the snow, or you mistook a windmill for a sentry post and sometimes you heard a burst of gunfire. It is no good trying to escape if you suffer from a weak heart. The last moments were often the most unnerving—anything might happen in no-man's land.

One of our men followed a railway line, with marshes on either side of it. Germany was behind him. Russia lay in front of him. Right in the middle of no-man's land the line was lit up with a solitary lamp: how could he pass it without being seen? He had the feeling that all the machine-guns in the world were trained on to that one patch of light, but he mustered up his courage and walked past!

Auberger and his team managed to reach Lithuania without misadventures—they went on walking all night. Alas, without realising it, they walked in a circle and when daylight came they found themselves back in Germany, almost a couple of miles behind the farm from which they had set out!

Marais and Rimlinger reached the frontier, crossed its barbed wire and walked on cheerfully. They reached a second line of barbed wire and joyfully crossed it; walking on about eighty yards they came to a German sign-post, bearing names of towns they knew only too well! Yet they were quite sure they had walked due east. They



turned back on their trail, crossed first one and then the other barbed-wire line—but they were still in Germany. They repeated this five times, and each time they walked from a German signpost to a German railway line or vice-versa. At last, when they thought they were going out of their minds, they decided to wait for daylight between the barbed-wire lines. When day broke, they realised that they had struck the frontier at a point where it made a hairpin bend!

It is when this kind of thing happens that you go through agonies of uncertainty—and it is just these emotions which are the most difficult to describe. Sometimes you are still uncertain, even when you have crossed the frontier. Lavergne and his friends reached a Lithuanian village at two in the morning, and one of them went to scout around. He came to a house which was still lit up, looked through the window, and saw a portrait of Vorochiloff on the wall; not being familiar with Soviet notorieties, he took the portrait for Hitler's. He hurried back to his friends and said: "We're done for!" There was a wide river running near-by. Thinking this must be the frontier, he threw himself in and swam to the other side. His comrades, who couldn't swim, sat there very dejected and waited for daylight, when Soviet sentries turned up and put their minds at ease by arresting them!

Such dangers and anxieties are part and parcel of every escape, but naturally the further one had to travel, the more exposed one was to them. In order to carry out a long distance escape on foot you need more than sheer endurance: you have to be resourceful and cool-headed, to react quickly and have a good eye for seizing your opportunities. Jachnisky, who, with the help of his knowledge of Polish, calmly rode from Berlin to Warsaw on his bicycle, was an exception. If you had to cover a long distance, you had to be prepared to take your time

over it, and not mind the risk of running short of food.

There is one man among us who is at home anywhere, and can turn anything to account. His name is Leblond. He is a young wine-grower, only twenty years old, energetic, in spite of his slow diction, cunning, persevering, never hasty, and he comes from good old French peasant stock. He is never at a loss for anything of a practical nature. He can make a net out of a piece of string, or build a house out of mud. As they say in his district: "He knows his business!" Leblond always knows his business, no matter what it is, nor how new to him. You could never catch him unawares! His escape took him a month—which is our record. When his food gave out, he would milk a cow, or dig up potatoes or gather beans and cabbages, and cook himself a meal in the middle of the woods. If the weather was bad he would spend a few days in one place, waiting for the stars to come out.

On the seventh day of his escape, he and his friends were spotted and chased. His friends were shot, but Leblond, surrounded by Germans and with nothing but marshes on either side of him, dived into the water and stayed there until the chase was over.

When he had reached Lithuania, Leblond went on for another seventy-five miles or so, and was only arrested in Kaunas, a few hundred yards from the British Legation.

Naturally escapes like Leblond's are the most rich in emotion. You never know what to expect, and although you are perpetually haunted by uncertainty, you cannot change your nature and you are still quite capable of admiring the sunrise, or thinking such and such a woman's hat quite appalling! When walking along a German road on a beautiful summer night, everything seems so easy, and the fugitive feels that he is the freest man in Germany

—but he knows all the time that the snag will appear in the most unexpected way.

That traveller sitting in the corner of a railway compartment is an escaped prisoner. The Germans beside him are blissfully unaware of this. I wonder what his thoughts are as he sits absorbed in his *Berliner Tageblatt* (I need not wonder, I need only remember!) Well, after a while, he thinks the whole thing rather funny, quite natural in fact, as though the trip had been preordained for him by Providence. He feels so much at ease, and a wave of arrogance comes over him: these Germans sitting by him are such fools! A school child shares an apple with his neighbours. "Give a piece to the gentleman in the corner," he wants to whisper. A young girl has just sat down opposite him: she is wearing a bonnet like Little Red Riding Hood, and is warming her cold fingers with her breath. The prisoner looks at her legs: it is almost a year since he last saw legs in silk stockings, even if these stockings are just artificial silk. Then he looks at her face. He thinks, with a little pang, as though it were all rather remote, that he will have to get out at the third stop, and that there will probably be a police barrage to cross. At the same time he is thinking that he will never see this girl's face again . . . then suddenly he is ashamed that such a thought should have crossed his mind.

At that moment the guard walks into the compartment to punch the tickets; beneath his Prussian cap his face is red and bloated.

Outside, there are soldiers patrolling the platform. . . .

## III

## THE POMERANIAN ESCAPES

*(Extracts from a prisoner's diary)*

NOV. 16th Auzary really does possess a decent railway map. Made a good impression on me, with his school-boy's head and glasses. We have decided to plan our escape together.

Nov. 18th evening Auzary explained his plans to me. Some Poles managed to travel from Warsaw to Paris under a train, hanging on to the bogies. You have to tie yourself by your belt to one of the vertical axles in case you fall asleep, and when the train stops you must draw up your legs so the men who check the bolts do not spot you. It is very rough travelling like this because of the rushing draught under the train. Still, with determination, cotton-wool in one's ears and a supply of brandy, one should be able to hold out.

Nov. 25th Made no progress for the last eight days, except managing to exchange fifteen camp marks for ten Reichsmarks.

Nov. 26th Marvellous luck which simplifies matters: managed to exchange one hundred camp marks for one hundred Reichsmarks!

Nov. 27th Auzary and I have decided to form a group and escape together.

Nov. 28th Swiss frontier rigorously well guarded! Round Schaffhausen the frontier consists of a threefold network of electrified barbed wire (according to Feldwebel Dalber). That knocks our plans on the head.

Auzary has bought a black greatcoat of the Royal Norwegian Guards. It has got red braid and silver buttons, and cost five marks, and also two French military

greatcoats. At lunchtime Van Z—— took me to the Belgians' hut. L—— who was taken prisoner in September on the frontier, as he was returning from the Côte d'Azur, has offered me an unbleached linen suit for thirteen marks!

*Nov. 28th evening* Three huts were searched this afternoon, one of them being ours—worse luck. This evening we had a grand council in Hut XIII on C——'s bunk. No use trying to get through the electrified network on the Swiss frontier. Could one risk crossing the Rhine? C—— and M—— would lend us a lilo to use as a raft. This plan is obviously absurd!

*Nov. 29th* Spent the morning with Auzary at the Kartei. Decided on the Austrian route: travel by train to south of Graz, then walk to Maribor.

*Nov. 30th* Jacques has given me a large tin of sweetened powdered milk. We could each have one soup-spoonful of it, every morning and evening.

*Dec. 2nd* Auzary has discovered a tailor who will alter his Norwegian greatcoat. He will work for us at night, by the glow of his oil-lamp. Present from M——: a pair of slippers.

*Dec. 3rd* This afternoon, visit to the dentist, in the German military camp. We took a look round: barbed wire across all the windows, sentries on duty in front of and behind the pavilion. Alarm would be given before we could even get past the second line. . . .

*Dec. 4th* Great day: the Italians are getting a good dose in Greece. Van Z—— again nosed me out. L—— is now offering me his dinner-jacket. Tempting—but he wants thirty-five marks for it!

*Dec. 5th* Inspected the camp. Obviously impossible to dig a tunnel.

*Dec. 8th* Hut searched.

*Dec. 7th* Auzary's coat finished: nothing to shout about!

*Dec. 8th* G——, S——, and P—— are also preparing to escape. They are making for Lithuania where the frontier is not well guarded: barbed wire network not continuous—sentry posts every mile or so, and hourly patrols with police dogs.

*Dec. 9th* Decided not to wait for the spring—because they will be sure to tighten up their supervision.

*Dec. 14th* "Can imprisonment make one go mad?" little Lucas asked me gravely.

*Dec. 15th* Flandin has been appointed President of the Council. Violent reactions. According to the Post Office Captain, two German divisions have been sent to the south of Graz. Quite plausible, seeing the turn of events in Greece.

*Dec. 16th* Yesterday the Stalag theatre gave its first performance with *Le medecin malgré lui*.

*Dec. 17th* At last I have got a coat. Van Z——, who is broke too, offered me his own mac. It has raglan sleeves and comes from Alba. A bit small, but clean. Thirty marks. I did not bargain. Still no hat.

*Dec. 18th* New rumours about Yugoslavia. We are now thinking of escaping through Lithuania.

*Dec. 19th* Changed huts. They have added eight hundred soldiers back from Kommando work to our camp, as though there were not a squash already! They have got no bunks to sleep in, so they have to sleep on the cement floor. G—— has gone off to Kommando work.

*Dec. 20th* Our tailor is going to make Auzary a Norwegian cap: it will be his first hat made to measure. As for me, I still have not found a cap. Maddening.

*Dec. 22nd* A sergeant from Hut II has had a letter telling him that one of his friends who escaped from Russia is back in France. Looks as though Russia does not intern people. That settles it: we will escape via Lithuania!

*Dec. 23rd evening* At last I have got a hat! As I was

going up the Kartei at two o'clock, a tall lanky fellow from the 410 Pioneer Corps was sitting out in the sun in front of Hut XI, wearing an enormous old felt hat which must have been khaki in its time. After a long discussion he promised to give it to me if I could substitute it with anything 'in good condition'.

*Dec. 24th* The Germans have stuck a little Christmas-tree with electric lamps into the snow in front of the hair-dressing hut. "Come on, cheer up, it is Christmas."

*Dec. 25th* Yesterday evening a play was given by the old stagers of the Stalag. Then Midnight Mass. Congregation very much moved. Coming out I heard Millet, who is usually sceptical, say: "Did you see the candles? They were as bright as the candles of my childhood." Then everyone burst into reminiscences: "Back home."—"Do you remember, back home. . . ."

*Dec. 25th evening* Depressed: read *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* by Balzac.

Auzary has discovered a Royal Norwegian Guard cap for my Pioneer fellow. It is green, lined with grey silk and has a polished peak: a work of art.

*Dec. 26th* Everything was too good to be true, alas. I rushed along to Hut XI at mid-day to give my bloke his Norwegian cap: he was wearing a khaki skull-cap. I was horrified. "You see, it was so uncomfortable, I cut the brim off." Fool! When he saw my expression, he understood it was a serious matter and apologised. "I did it this morning. I thought you were not coming; you can look in the dustbins. They probably have not been emptied yet, and you will find the brim there. Here is the foundation, if it is any use to you." I threw the cap at him. I was lucky enough to find the brim at the bottom of the fourth dustbin, drowned in the remains of turnip soup.

*Dec. 27th morning* Spent the evening washing the object,

while Auzary, who managed to get a basin of boiling water from the kitchen, was dyeing my trousers.

*Dec. 27th evening* The team G—, S—, P— escaped from their Kommando on Christmas Eve, according to plan.

The easiest way for us to get out will be to leave by the main door, dressed as civilians. This would be better still if one had an armlet and could pass like a civilian from the Gestapo or the Arbeits-Einsatz.

*Dec. 28th morning* Auzary has bought himself a pair of light tan, almost pink, trousers without a seat. It cost twenty marks. He is going to patch the seat.

*Dec. 28th evening* Telegram arrived from Königsberg saying that the team G—, S—, P— had been recaptured. Hat dry at last: a sorry sight!

*Dec. 29th evening* Spent the evening on my bunk, sewing the hat together by the light of an oil-lamp. M— has offered me the leather band from his béret and suggests sewing it inside my hat.

*Dec. 30th* Finished a map of East Prussia. Found a filthy old suitcase on the black market. As Gamelin would have said: "*We are virtually ready.*" Apparently there are some numbered armlets in the Sonderführer's cupboard: shall we dare . . . ?

*Dec. 30th evening* Searched the Sonderführer's office. As we had no torches we had to switch on the middle lamp, which was almost fatal for us. Got back to our huts with chattering teeth.

*Jan. 1st 1941, four o'clock* A convoy of a hundred and twenty-five workers will leave the camp to-morrow morning at six o'clock. Here is our chance! The Jerries will still be drunk and we shall slip out with the convoy without being counted. I have just quickly sewn a silk khaki tie round my hat instead of a ribbon. Auzary is raging, thinks it is too premature to leave now, etc. . . .



*Eight o'clock* We have got Théo to settle the matter.

"Do you think you will go far in that soft snow?"

"But it is our great chance—it would be madness to let it slip. . . ."

"Are you ready?"

"Except for his hat," interrupts Auzary.

"Go and fetch it. . . . Do you call that a hat? My dear boy, you will not get more than twenty yards, do you hear, not more than twenty yards, in that hat. Wait three months if you have to, but the day you leave, don't look like a tramp."

Auzary and I parted on bad terms. Théo is probably right.

*Jan. 2nd* Spent over an hour modelling my hat over some so-called boiling water, to make it look like a Tyrolean hat. Results: poor.

*Jan. 3rd evening* At three o'clock this afternoon, the team C—, S—, P— came into the Kartei under escort. They said a few words as they passed, before being led to the Sonderführer. "Eydkau . . . captured on the frontier, within sight of the Russian sentries. We were held up by dogs, not bitten, but we could not budge an inch. . . ."

*Jan. 5th* I am going to make a little tuft for my Tyrolean hat out of horse-hair. Germanic elegance!

*Jan. 6th afternoon* At the post office, got hold of a pass, which Inspector Hoffmann of the Arbeits-Einsatz was returning to the Kommandantur for renewal. I have 'borrowed' it till to-morrow. Now to work.

*Jan. 7th* Another escape. C— and J— left on Saturday. No one knew. Big joke. Another evening devoted to my hat. It does honour to the Tyrol.

*Jan. 8th evening* Returned the pass after having traced it twice. At lunch-time cut two false cards out of a folder in the Kartei, and typed out the text on the Arbeits-

Einsatz typewriter. By practising on the tracings, I am beginning to make good imitations of the camp commandant's signature. Now all one has to do is to reproduce the stamp (an eagle and swastika: 'Deutsches Reich'). The tiresome thing is that my model is out-of-date and the 1941 Ausweis may be quite different.

*Jan. 10th evening* Tried in vain to reproduce the stamp by blackening a two mark piece with indelible pencil, wetting it, and stamping the paper with it. Messy results.

*Jan. 11th evening* Gave a final touch to my hat. Still no stamp. Tried tracing the coin on to the paper, wetting this and placing it on card, still messy. C—— told me about the famous potato method. Am I unusually clumsy? I cannot get good results—nor can Auzary.

*Jan. 13th evening* A miracle. Miracles do happen! C——, whom I have known for three months and have seen every day for the last six weeks, is a professional forger in civilian life. Why on earth did he not tell me this before?

*Jan. 15th* We have planned to leave on Saturday evening. We are just going to walk out without armlets. It is better to have a shot straight away; every day makes our passes more out-of-date.

Had my hair cut in the German style—close cropped all round, with just a tuft on top. But I still hardly look like a great blond dolichocephalous!

*Jan. 19th* Missed our chance. Maddening. C—— was so busy all the week that he only gave us our passes at four-thirty, and the Black Market chap, who had promised Auzary three weeks ago that he would give him change for a thousand-franc note, kept us waiting until five p.m. . . . too late to catch the evening train.

*Jan. 21st* Each time we miss our chance, we have some new stroke of luck! To-day, rummaging in a drawer at the Kartei, I found three numbered armlets. They are

not the right kind, but they will do. Now we are all set!

We are going to wait until Saturday. There is more risk now that we shall be asked to show 1941 passes, but they may be less careful at the week-end. . . .

*Jan. 22nd* C—— and J—— were recaptured in Berlin. Slawik triumphant: "Das Deutsches Reich is gross! But your two scoundrels have been caught all the same!"

*Jan. 23rd* Pinched some adhesive tape from the Infirmary to insulate our nippers. In spite of this precaution I don't fancy coming across an electrified entanglement!

*Jan. 24th* Overhauled our gear. We shall leave the train at Ebenrode, or even at Eydkau if there has been no inspection before that. We shall go south, along the frontier, for about 15 miles, then due east. The hardest thing will be walking through the soft snow, especially if it is thick. Hope to God we don't run into wolves!

*Saturday, Jan. 25th* We are off this evening between 4.30 p.m. and 4.45 p.m., as soon as the day sentries have left. We shall leave by the main entrance, in civilian clothes, with our armlets on, and our passes ready. If all goes well, we shall take the 5.40 p.m. from Hammerstein (Platform 2) towards Konitz.

On the evening of the day Captain Billotte's escape was discovered, Boissieu and his team decided to dig their tunnel. Captain Billotte's escape, the first successful one from Oflag 2D, had taken place three days ago.

On February 1st at two o'clock in the afternoon, as was the daily custom, a few dozen officers lined up five abreast at the main door of their Block for their daily walk. "By fives!" the sentries shouted. As though by chance, the three smallest officers of the column found themselves next the three largest ones, who were wearing those immense caps that some of our units wore in 1940. In the disorder which always precedes falling into rank, each of the three

small officers slipped, with the utmost discretion, under the cloak of his imposing neighbour. When the sentries were counting the number of officers present, the three camouflage teams took the extra precaution of each lifting "his inside leg" as Grelot put it, and no German sentry would have been capable of noticing that the two legs which emerged from under the cloak did not match! Thus 80 prisoners, in reality, 83, went out for their walk. The column stretched out over a long distance, and the sentries were all walking at the front except for two who dragged behind at the rear. When they had got a good way from the camp, the three officers slipped out of their military cloaks, put on civilian caps, and stepped out of the ranks. Then, very calmly, like good Pomeranians out for the day, they walked down beside the column and greeted the rear-guard sentries with a joyful "Heil Hitler!" as they passed. Then Captain Billotte, Captain de Person and Lieutenant Bozel went to catch their train at Roedritz station, and while the 80 prisoners returned to the Oflag without incident, the three little Tom Thumbs were joyfully trotting along where there had been three giants. . . .

When the absence of the fugitives was discovered, the Germans had got the wind up, and although they had not the slightest suspicion of the method Billotte's team had adopted, it seemed unwise to use it a second time.

"We must dig a tunnel," Boissieu kept repeating. Beyond the barbed-wire entanglement round the camp lay a stretch of open ground which was flood-lit at night by powerful searchlights. Boissieu had spent many a night examining the lay-out of the ground and watching the sentries in order to discover the safest spot for an exit. When he thought that he had found a suitable place, the team agreed to his plan.

The three young men set to work next day. As soon as

they had decided which room was to serve as the head of the tunnel, and had told the occupants (none of whom betrayed them), they cut a trapdoor in the floor boards, and the two Lieutenants, de Boissieu and Grelot, began to dig a pit. The soil was sandy and hence easy to work, though when you have no implement except a large soup spoon digging can hardly be called easy. The real problem, however, was where to put the sand after it had been extracted from the tunnel. Luckily the hut did not rest directly on the ground: in fact the floor was roughly three inches to a foot about ground level, so that one could spread the soil from the tunnel evenly over the ground under the hut. Even then they had to be careful, as they had calculated that the volume of soil from the tunnel would be at least eleven or twelve cubic yards. Another difficulty was that the space between the ground and the hut was not big enough to enable them to crawl about. So before the tunnel was started they had to dig a network of trenches under the hut. This tremendous and exhausting work had to be done without rousing the suspicions of the occupants of rooms 1 and 2, who were not let into the secret.

When the trenches had been dug, they sank a pit about 10 feet deep; a wooden ladder, made from bunk boards, was placed in the shaft, and they began to drive a sap, about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet high, which, at about 8 feet below ground level, would be about 70 feet long and end at the spot chosen for the exit. It was not difficult to drive the tunnel in the right direction, as they had compasses—but the digging was enormously difficult. "I think it was the most exhausting and demoralising work I have ever undertaken," one of Boissieu's companions said afterwards. An escape tunnel is so narrow and low that, while he is digging it out, a man has to crawl on all fours or lie on his side. Using his hands to dig with (actually nearly the whole

thing was done by hand) the man in the tunnel would scrape the soil to the level of his stomach, then he would pile it into one of the cloth sacks which the German authorities issued us as pillow-cases. Then he would have to crawl backwards, as it was quite impossible to turn round in the tunnel, and drag the sackful of soil to the pit head; there his mate would receive it, carry it to ground level, and crawling on his stomach under the hut, empty the contents at the right spot and pack the soil evenly and as hard as he could with his hands or an old broom.

Meanwhile the man in the tunnel had started to dig away again like a mole. After half an hour of this work he was aching all over and had cramp in his wrists: in spite of the fact that he had decided to sacrifice his motorised cavalry waterproof uniform for this work, the cold and damp from the soil seeped through to his body. He worked by the faint glow of an oil-lamp stuck into the sand, but the slightest clumsiness would put out the flame. In that case, as his matches were usually soaked through, he would have to crawl backwards to the pit in order to re-light the wick.

Little by little as the tunnel grew in length, there were new difficulties. In order to prevent the tunnel from caving in, it had to be supported by shafts at every two or three yards. This meant finding planks, cutting them to the right size, dragging them down into the tunnel and fitting them up. Then there was the problem of ventilation. Over and over again the work had to be stopped for lack of oxygen. Fortunately the lamp served as a signal as it would go out when there was no more oxygen, and the man in the tunnel would have to crawl out quickly; if he was bent on continuing his work he would deflate an air-cushion which one of the members of the team had received from France and which was

always taken into the tunnel in case of emergency.

And so for weeks on end, day in and day out, and sometimes at night, a little group of French officers, helped by a few obliging friends, took turns to dig a passage through the Pomeranian soil. In the hut, the trapdoor, which was concealed under a table covered with a large cloth, would open suddenly and swallow two or three officers in their curious garb. When the trapdoor had been shut, the inmates of the room would take up their normal occupations, while several dozen yards away, ant-like, the officers were busily digging the tunnel leading to freedom.

Suddenly there would be an alarm which threatened the whole undertaking. One day, the door of the hut burst open: "Everyone must stay where he is. The hut is going to be searched." And three soldiers, under the supervision of a German captain rummaged round the room, felt the mattresses, moved the beds and examined clothes. They came dangerously near the trapdoor . . . but no doubt they were looking for something else.

A few days later Colonel Gerhardt had a brain-wave: he decided to have the huts carefully examined underneath, in order to 'de-rat' them. No one was taken in; the whole camp began to talk about Colonel Gerhardt's imaginary tunnels, and posters with the words 'ZUM TUNNEL' and an arrow were pinned up. Through the oversight of a Feldwebel the hut which concealed a tunnel was the only one not searched.

The third alarm took place there a week later. This time it was an unexpected roll-call—and Boissieu was in the tunnel. He was rapidly hauled out, but all covered in earth; he could not have gone to a roll-call in that condition.

"Never mind," he said, "I'll stay in the hut!"

The roll-call took place. By another stroke of luck the sentries, whose job it was to count the number present, never noticed there was one man missing.

But in spite of the Germans' infinite precautions and endless searches, catastrophe came from another source. At first the soil, which was sandy but damp, had kept the shape of the tunnel, but as it dried the soil began to crumble and cave in. "It's a dreadful feeling, to be nine or ten feet in the earth in a passage less than three feet high, at a good distance from the entrance, while layers of fine soil threaten to fall in at any minute and block your way out," said Lieutenant B——. "Slow death with no hope—that's what might have been in store for us." Little M—— was almost buried under a fall of sand and Boissieu had to help drag him out.

A few days later while Boissieu was crawling out of the tunnel, an enormous layer of soil crumbled and fell in on him, pinning him down where he lay. B——, who was in the pit, heard the noise and hurried down the tunnel. "Don't move!" he cried, and then managed to drag Boissieu out by the fret. Luckily Boissieu was not much the worse for this. However, when the team's engineer went down to have a look he said that the work would endanger life and must be stopped at once. All these efforts and risks had been fruitless!

About a week later, one of the men wanted to have just one more look at the tunnel, in spite of the danger. He came out again in horror: the earth had caved in so much that in some places there were piles of sand over three feet high! At this rate, in less than a fortnight or three weeks the tunnel would become an open trench. They held a consultation. A rival team was preparing to dig another tunnel and had collected a huge quantity of planks with which to line it. This team consented to go into partnership with the first, and a third team also joined in. The tunnel was cleared and every inch of it was lined with planks throughout its length. After ten days and nights spent on this work, there was only a slight partition of



earth to be dug away in order to come out into the open at the predetermined spot, beyond the barbed-wire enclosure of the camp.

From now on the problem—by no means the least difficult—was the actual escape. In order to have some chance of getting out of the tunnel successfully, three conditions were essential:

1. Foggy weather which would lessen the efficacy of the searchlights.

2. To choose the time when the nearest sentries were the least vigilant. This was very tricky.

3. Preferably to choose a windy night when the tracks of the fugitives would be covered up quickly.

Given these three conditions, there was some hope of success. Three men could wait at the end of the tunnel, choose the moment when the sentries who paced up and down were at least 100 feet away from the exit, and then make a dash for the nearest wood to get out of range of the machine-guns. But it was pretty certain that the alarm would be given, the dogs put on the scent and, above all, the tunnel discovered and consequently rendered useless for the following teams.

This was why they decided that at least one team should try the method used by Captain Billotte, to escape while on the afternoon walk. They drew lots in order to decide which team would adopt that method—and the lot fell to Boissieu's team. By the irony of fate this team was the only successful one of the three. The tunnel which they had constructed with such perseverance and at such risk had served in the end only to nourish the hopes of five or six prisoners for a few weeks.

In the space of two months, four teams of Frenchmen, totalling twelve prisoners, eleven of them officers and acting second lieutenants, escaped from prisoner of war

camps in Pomerania and reached Russia by working their way through the frontier at Eydkau after a train journey of about 300 miles. Each escape was somewhat different from the others. Auzary's team did the journey in record time, reaching the frontier in less than 36 hours; whereas the team Millet-Guyon-Meyer-Mittelle, the last to reach Russia (though losing one of its members who was arrested at Königsberg station), won the record in numbers. This journey across Germany enabled all these prisoners to get their own back on Hitler, on the Oflag, the Stalag, the Gerhardts and Slawiks—on the Hun, in fact—and in spite of what they went through, they all look back on their escape with joyful hearts. Freedom is absolutely intoxicating, and an escape which has been long and difficult to prepare is like a passion which has been growing steadily in spite of all ups and downs: when the fugitive sets out at last, he is as light-hearted and passionate as a man about to embrace his beloved at long last.

These adventures were all the more risky because in each team there was never more than one man who could converse in German—the others just tried to look like Germans and the safest way to do this was to pretend to be asleep. "You've no idea how well I know how to sleep," says Major de Person. It is a fact that, as his train had a delay of seven hours during the journey through Poland, de Person spent seven hours pretending to be asleep. Auzary, Boissieu and Meyer all had to do the same thing during their journeys. In this batch, all the escapes were somewhat alike, since the same route was used. Consequently the various episodes, comic and dramatic, which characterised them are more or less interchangeable. Captain Billotte's team, for example, made a *détour* round Danzig; and in a Königsberg hotel, while they were having coffee, they were able to sweeten

their coffee with French sugar, whereas their nextdoor neighbours, who only had the German ration, pulled long faces as they drained their cups. Boissieu's team stood themselves a round of brandy in a Weinstube, while a Nazi party group was holding a meeting in the selfsame place. When they reached the frontier they were stopped by guards, but Grelot, who spoke German like a native, had the presence of mind to pretend to be a young peasant leading two Italian workers to his father's farm, in proof of which he produced two certificates in approximate Italian which he had prepared at the Oflag in case of emergency. Millet's team found themselves re-enacting the 4th act of Edmond Rostand's play *L'Aiglon*, when, after walking all night long and thinking they were lost, they discovered themselves, at dawn, on the Friedland plateau. And when they wanted to cross the frontier river, during the spring thaw, they had to find a ford, and Millet almost had his feet frostbitten. These adventures are typical of the kind that all these teams experienced.

The following diary, which describes the first of these Pomeranian escapades, serves as a good example.

*(Extracts from the diary of the prisoner who escaped with  
Auzary)*

Jan. 28th 1941 . . . After having stuffed ourselves with a marvellous tin of turkey and drunk a quart of Ncs-café, we went to Kartei with our equipment hidden under blankets. Towards 4 p.m. we changed our clothes in the W.C. Then I remembered that I'd forgotten to bring anything to read. I rushed back to Hut XIII to fetch a book, and took the first I could lay my hands on, one I'd borrowed from C——: the poems of Nietzsche in the little Insel edition.

At ten minutes to five our two scouts told us the way was clear: no Germans and no Frenchmen about. We went out of the Kartei and walked straight towards the main entrance of the Stalag, with our passes in our hands. The sentry on duty looked at our armlets, and for a moment our hearts stopped beating; then the chief sentry recognised the camp commander's signature on our passes: "Heil Hitler!" he said, as he returned the passes.

"Heil Hitler!"

About 70 feet further down the road another sentry stopped us and our passes were again checked.

"Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!"

We passed the entrance and the sentry post. We walked quickly through the snow to the entrance of the military camp. It was three minutes past five when we left the outer enclosure.

5.30 *p.m.* Hammerstein Station. First contact with 'real Germans'. Terrified lest some slight flaw should betray us . . . ; humility of the poor man who first wears a borrowed suit of clothes in public! . . . ; anxiety at the ticket office when I had to speak for the first time in order to buy our tickets . . . ; quiet and peaceful joy as we walked up and down the platform in the snow, while the evening grew grey like a pall of smoke. . . . The train was late; among those who were waiting were two Feldwebels from the camp—one of whom was the 'Commander' of our battalion—walking up and down the platform. For three-quarters of an hour—as the train was half an hour late—we took great care not to run into these Feldwebels. Our freedom depended on this ridiculous game of hide and seek.

The train arrived at 6.05 *p.m.* and we got into a compartment full of soldiers and women; our arrival didn't even interrupt their animated conversation. We sat down

opposite one another, and I plunged straight into my Nietzsche.

“Die Krähen schreien, bald wird es schneien;  
Weh dem, der Keine Heimat hat!”\*

At that moment a kick on the shin interrupted my meditations. It was Auzary, whose neighbour was repeatedly asking him to shut the window. I hastened to the rescue.

7.30 *p.m.* Reached Konitz. We threw our armlets down the W.C.

9.15 *p.m.* Took the train for Dirschau. No lights in the train, the snow outside was shining brightly in the moonlight. Unusual and oppressive silence of the other passengers. We wondered if their uncommunicativeness meant anything—we never found out, but perhaps they were just sleepy.

11 *p.m.* Reached Dirschau three-quarters of an hour late. Missed the connection. Had to wait until 4.50 a.m. for the next train to Marienburg.

After buying our tickets for the next stage of the journey, we looked for the waiting-room. A large red sign, bearing the word ‘Warteräume’, pointed towards the entrance. We found ourselves in a large gothic room with hangings and stained-glass windows, where about thirty Germans were sitting at little tables and drinking half-pints of beer: it was the station bar. In the far corner of this sanctum there was another door. We walked confidently towards it. It led into the station dining-room where there was no other door. “Where is the waiting-room?” I asked a fat German who was sitting in front of a plate of noodles. He looked up at me stupidly, with his

\*“The crows caw, soon it will snow;  
Alas for him who has no home.”

fork in the air. "You're in it," he said at last. I stammered something or other and we beat a hasty retreat into the bar. There was a man sitting alone at a table, fast asleep with an empty glass in front of him. We went and sat down beside him and ordered two half-pints and some cigarettes. It was warm in this room, and a delicious sense of wellbeing dispelled all our apprehensions. I opened my Nietzsche and buried myself in it, while Auzary was absorbed in contemplating the *Völkischer Beobachter* which he was quite incapable of reading. Now and again I scribbled a note in the margin of a poem, a 'grossartig' or some more personal remark such as: "If you want to sleep, I'll keep an eye on the clock!" or "Give me some change, I don't want to change a 10 mark note here! . . ." Auzary took the book solemnly, turned the pages and nodded his head gravely, without understanding a word of the poems, and then made notes in the margin, "Ja! Ja's!" and scribbled an answer or another question.

We were in the middle of this poetic conversation when the door of the bar opened and in walked a German officer in his tin hat, followed by two armed soldiers. One soldier guarded the door while the officer, accompanied by the other soldier, went from table to table. The consumers quickly produced some identification or other photographs, Nazi membership cards from the collection of papers which all well-disciplined Germans always carry on their person. We were in a cold sweat. The officer was getting nearer, and had reached the next table to ours. "We're done for," said Auzary aloud, and quickly emptied his glass so as not to waste it. The soldiers came up to our table—we had to do something: without raising my head from my book I handed our two tickets to the officer. He looked at us, examined the tickets, returned them, saluted us . . . and went on to the next table.

Extraordinary! What could it mean? Perhaps they were going to arrest us at the door. Then the officer stopped at a table where there were some soldiers sitting—talked to them, raised his voice, and finally collared a corporal whose leave papers were not in order. We realised that there is such a thing as justice on this earth after all and we ordered two more half-pints!

We left Dirschau on the 5.05 a.m., had an hour's wait at Marienbourg before catching the Berlin-Königsberg express, and after a hair-raising journey—because German soldiers kept picking up conversations with Auzary, who merely replied "Ja! Ja!" and "Was?" haphazardly, we reached Königsberg toward 9 o'clock.

As soon as we arrived at the station we went to the toilet-room to have a shave and eat some sandwiches. Then we went to the refreshment-room to have some coffee and read the papers.

After being up all night and while waiting for further developments, our main problem in spending the day in a foreign town, with a temperature of twenty or twenty-five degrees below freezing point, was not how to pass the time but how to economise our strength. It was just striking ten: we went to the protestant cathedral at Königsberg for the main service. It was heated and provided with padded seats, so we stayed there for an hour and a half, during which time Auzary slept. Hymn-books were handed round. Then a preacher, who was fortunately very long-winded, climbed into the pulpit and informed us that if it were God's will that a hundred or even a hundred and fifty thousand young Germans should die for the greater glory of Germany, then God's will must be done. (I hope the verger was not surprised to find, one Sunday, French trouser buttons in his collection plate!) After we had alternately sat, stood up and knelt down a number of times, according to the rhythm of the blessing

and prayers, we left the sacred building in the midst of a cold-blooded crowd of young Prussian girls of good family, who looked down their noses at our clothes.

Then we took our suitcases to the station cloak-room, confident that no one would trouble to look inside them, and decided to visit the town. We walked down the Pregel embankment, and saw endless cargo-boats frozen in the ice. We looked for Kant's house, went to the skating rink, got lost and then found ourselves again, and finally went to the cinema to spend the afternoon restfully and discreetly. In the lobby there was a notice saying 'Cloak-room compulsory'. What a shock! Auzary was wearing his French officer's jacket under his Norwegian coat. Luckily this notice only applied to umbrellas! In the darkness we felt more at ease. Pity the film was so stupid—but what made up for it was the newsreel which showed us Rudolf Hess's New Year: we never dreamt that he would reach England before us!

7 p.m. We collected our suitcases from the cloak-room, had another meal in the toilet-room and then coffee in the buffet. Long and weary wait for the Eydkau train, which arrived seventy minutes late. The cold was unbearable. On the next line to ours was a trainload of German soldiers going to Paris for their leave. With heavy hearts we watched the train draw out of the station.

We left Königsberg at 9.30 p.m., an hour late. The train was not lighted and we were alone in our compartment. Auzary stretched out on the seat and went to sleep. Outside the night was clear and the moon shone on the snow.

At Insterburg the train filled up. Five or six soldiers, all of them drunk, came into our compartment. When they saw Auzary stretched out on the seat, one of them began to strike matches under his nose: I was terrified that if he woke up with a start, he'd immediately burst out into



French. I tried to stop or prevent them from waking him up by telling them that I thought the gentleman looked ill. But they persisted in teasing him, until he woke up muttering something or other, and then huddled himself up in a corner. Little by little it all got quiet and you could only make out the presence of people by the two rows of wrist-watches with luminous faces on either side of the compartment.

As we drew nearer the frontier, more and more people left the train, and towards 11.30 p.m. there was only one S.S. man in our compartment, snoring away as peacefully as Auzary. As the train had been at a standstill for at least a quarter of an hour, I got out and asked a railway official, who was walking along the track swinging a red lantern, where we were.

"Eydkau," he said, "everyone must leave the train."

I awakened Auzary and the S.S. man, and we got out together. A ticket collector who was just leaving the empty station asked us where we lived. "At Göritten," I said, as we'd foreseen this question. The S.S. man led us to the centre of the village, and then took a turning to the right. We took a turning to the left.

It was about twenty or thirty degrees below freezing point. The main road which ran along the frontier from north to south was so covered with ice that after about a mile or so we couldn't help slipping and falling down. We covered our shoes with our woollen socks. As we still kept slipping we tore our face-towels into pieces and tied them round our feet. We went on walking for an hour and a half in the moonlight. Then, when we thought we'd got far enough from Eydkau we bore due east. A little road to the east led straight into the military zone. We walked along this road for a mile or so, and then came to a fork in the road where we decided to wait until the moon had set. We ate some cheese and figs, our last meal

in Germany. Auzary put on a white shirt over his coat so as to be less conspicuous against the snow. We were just rearranging our face towels round our shoes when we heard a dog barking . . . then all the dogs of all the neighbouring farms began to bark. . . . We listened carefully: the barking was coming nearer. Behind us, on the road to Göritten there were lights moving. It sounded as though the dogs were barking at us, and were hot on our scent. . . . Suddenly, coming towards us on the same road, was another light only about 250 yards away. There was no ditch and no wood to hide in. . . . We hastily stuffed our pockets with provisions, dumped our cases behind a tree, and sprinkled them with pepper to put the dogs off the scent. We jumped over the barbed-wire fence which ran along the road, and plunged straight ahead across the fields. Auzary took our bearings with his phosphorescent compass, and ran on in front, due east. I followed him a few yards behind, carrying the nippers in one hand and a packet of pepper in the other. We'd only got about 20 yards from the fork in the road when our pursuers reached it. As we looked over our shoulders, we could see their torches sweeping the ground for a few seconds, then beams of light, shining to the right, then to the left, in our direction, and finally they continued straight along the road.

We went on running; we kept falling down and picking ourselves up again. In the hollows the snow was three feet deep, but on the mounds the wind had blown it away and we kept twisting our ankles on frozen clods. At the end of each field we had to cross a barbed-wire fence, and sometimes a barbed-wire entanglement. After running well over a mile I caught my feet in the rags which were wrapped round my shoes, and fell headlong on to the ground. For a moment I thought I had put my knee out and that I'd be unable to go any further. I saw myself in

the same boat as G.P. and S., who were caught on the frontier—one's imagination works rapidly at such moments. Actually, the most serious thing was that I'd broken a bottle of methylated spirits which was in my pocket, and I was reeking with the smell of it. "Now the dogs can't miss us!" grumbled Auzary. To put them off the scent we dropped a heavily peppered handkerchief and set off again at full speed across the frozen plain. In order to be able to hear our pursuers if they got on to our tracks, we took off our balaclavas; besides, we were dripping with sweat. We came to another barbed-wire fence and crawled through it. When we were on the other side Auzary stopped and said in a deathly voice: "I've lost the compass!" We retraced our footsteps, crossed the barbed-wire again, and looked everywhere for the compass: impossible to find it in the snow. It was just then that the second alarm was given: a horn blew, and dogs began to bark. The noise came nearer and nearer, and we could see torches flashing over the snow. We began to run again, and had to cross the barbed-wire fence once more, tearing great pieces out of our coats as we did so. We ran around farm buildings, crossed frozen streams and had nothing to guide us except the stars. Several times we could hear our pursuers coming closer and then they'd drop back again. Obviously they hadn't let the dogs off the lead, but were merely using them to guide them towards us: that's what saved us!

Towards three or four in the morning, we crossed a large river where there was a barbed-wire entanglement on the ice itself. We thought this must be the frontier. During the next two hours we crossed this river six times! It probably was the frontier, but on our way we kept having to cross its winding course.

At about five o'clock in the morning we saw a faint blue light in the distance and thought it must be an electric

light suspended over the Königsberg-Kaunas railway line. We kept on walking towards it for a very long time: then we realised that it was a blueish star just on the horizon!

A little before dawn we came to the top of a hill and suddenly saw an armed soldier on patrol, only fifty feet away. We walked steadily on . . . we passed him—but we kept expecting him to fire on us and we listened for the noise of his gun being charged, and then the report. . . . Nothing happened. Perhaps he didn't want to see us. We don't know to this day whether he was a Russian or a German. When we had got a safe distance away, Auzary pulled out his handkerchief to mop his forehead: out fell the lost compass! I laughed, in order to prevent myself from throttling him.

Finally daylight came: a crimson sunrise over the white plain, with a miraculously clear pale blue sky. Little huts, almost buried in the snow, were dotted about here and there, and in the distance was a wooden tower, a shooting-box perhaps, or a lookout post for spotting fires. We went on walking across country till half-past eleven without meeting a soul. Then we ventured into a cemetery. The graves were neglected, but the tombstones bore legible inscriptions in a language which was *not German!* Like tramps in search of a country we looked at one another, and sought reassurance in each other's eyes. Then, heedless of our ragged clothes, we walked down on to the road to Kaunas. Our feet were light in spite of our fatigue. There was a brilliantly clear sky and as we walked the snow crunched softly beneath our feet. . . .

## IV

PIERRE DESCHAMPS

DESCHAMPS, the taciturn Deschamps, was one of those men who even after their escape, in fact even after they had reached England, could never forgive themselves for having been taken prisoner. One need only have seen his smile and the gentle expression which lit up his face to have understood how passionate and how resolved this forty-three-year-old man was. Born and bred on the rough French soil of his native Lyonnais, he was sturdy, patient, grave, endowed with elemental purity of spirit, and always ready to devote himself more and more to others. He came from that race of men who built the cathedrals, became Napoleon's veterans, and held fast at Valmy and at Verdun. Deschamps' faith was never shaken. The Republic was not just an empty word for him. He did not have to come into contact with Germans to learn what it was to be French, nor did he doubt for a moment that it was his duty to escape after he had been captured; and when he escaped it was in order to serve France again.

Captured on May 21st 1940 near Boulogne, he escaped almost at once and tried to cross the German lines to join his division. He held his own for eight days in the middle of the German troops, before being recaptured and sent to Germany. He was more determined than ever to escape, and the first thing he did on his arrival in East Prussia was to sell all his personal belongings, even his spare shirt, so as to obtain money for his escape.

He was sent to a Kommando only about fifty miles from the Lithuanian frontier. As he was the oldest prisoner in the convoy, and looked the most reliable, he was placed with the mayor of the Commune and was therefore un-

guarded. He only needed to collect 2 lbs of biscuits and a dozen eggs and to steal a map from a near-by building, and then he was ready to leave. So he set out.

From the very start, he felt that he was being protected by some mysterious power: Deschamps must have been the kind of man who deserves miracles, or to whom they always happen. When he was walking through the forest, and when his master's dog—who had become attached to him—went home after the first three miles, all the wild animals seemed to welcome him as a friend. He wrapped his shoes up in rags in order to deaden the noise of his footsteps. Deer quietly passed him or fearlessly went on grazing beside the road. All nature seemed to welcome and protect Deschamps, the peasant, who was fleeing from this land of infidels to reach France again.

He continued walking for two nights. By dawn, on the third day, he had covered about sixty miles and was certain that he had passed the frontier. The signposts did not look like German ones, and all the local place-names ended in 'ski'. Feeling perfectly confident, he walked along the road to the next town; as all the inhabitants were still asleep he made for the main square, and waited in front of the church for the arrival of the bell-ringers or the church-warden. "Because," as he told me, "those people must be far more human than many others."

A woman, still in her nightgown, came out of a house and went to relieve herself in her garden. When he saw that she was about to go indoors he approached her and asked:

"Lithūn hier?" (Lithuania, here?)

"Deutschland!" she answered, slamming the door in his face. . . .

At that moment, a man came walking towards him; he looked so humble that Deschamps thought he must be Polish, so he asked him the same question: "Lithūn?"

"Deutschland," was again the answer. Then the man beckoned to him mysteriously. "Komon, Komon." Deschamps followed the man without asking questions and was led into a stable. He thought he was safe, and so waited quietly, thinking his own thoughts. Suddenly a noise made him jump. He turned round, and there in the doorway was a policeman pointing a revolver at him.

Two years later Deschamps still spoke of this incident with remorse. "And I would not to be taken prisoner again: I was an awful fool. The man whom I met in the Square was not a Pole, he was a stableman of the German Police station!"

An hour later, Deschamps was taken to the municipal prison, just an ordinary hut with barred windows and a reinforced door. A schoolboy who lived near-by was called in to act as an interpreter at a short interrogation. Deschamps was not ill-treated. The local inhabitants had grown so accustomed to living on the borders of the three countries that they were without hatred. He was fed, and asked to chop firewood in the courtyard. He spent the whole day chopping wood and chatting with the little schoolboy, from whom he found out that he had crossed the Lithuanian frontier but had walked into Germany again as the frontier at this point formed a hairpin bend. He had walk two hours too long. The frontier lay behind him and ahead of him, quite near. He was told where it was, also that he was lucky to have got to this place as the Russians would have shot him.

At six o'clock in the evening, when he was told that he would be sent back to the Stalag on the day after tomorrow, he was so exhausted that when he was back in his prison he slept like a log for twelve hours.

The whole of the following day he spent chopping wood in the yard. It was still daylight when he was again locked up in his prison. Feeling rested by the previous night's

sleep, he stood at the window thinking about the Lithuanian frontier which was only three miles away, and that he was going to be sent back to the Stalag next morning. As he stood there gazing and muttering to himself, he took from his pocket a nail which he had picked up that afternoon and mechanically scratched away at the window-frame. Before long a little piece of wood broke away. He looked at it, and this little chip of wood became for him what the apple was for Newton. Beneath the simplicity of this peasant there was, besides his faith and resolution, a good deal of creative imagination.

An idea suddenly dawned upon him. He examined the window closely. The bars were set in the wooden framework, and might not be very secure. Deschamps immediately set to work. An old sack lay on the floor of the hut. He fetched it and kept it by him to throw over the sill should anyone come into the room. Then, with his hand wrapped up in his handkerchief, he began to chip the wood away with his single nail. This work was slow and tiring, and gave him cramp in his hands, but with great patience and a will of iron he managed after three and half hours to loosen first one bar and then another. He twisted them apart, making an opening about 16 inches long and 10 inches wide: very small, but it would have to do! The bars were fixed on the inside of the window: the next job was to take out the panes, still with the nail as his only tool, and then to remove the wooden casement. When he had done this, he threw his bundle—greatcoat, shoes, and even his jersey—out of the window. The opening was so small that the less clothing he wore the better, and even then it would be an acrobatic feat to get out. He began to climb out, feet first, then his hips: so far, so good. But his chest got stuck: he wriggled and twisted, holding his breath, and managed to move an inch or two further, but then he



was hopelessly jammed. Try as he would, he could not budge, as his armpits were stuck in the bars. There he hung suspended, ten feet or so above the road. It was so painful that although he was as strong as a horse he could hardly refrain from crying out. Finally, by summoning up all his strength in one superhuman effort, he managed to haul himself back into the room, and dropped down on to the floor half-dead with exhaustion. He remained there for a quarter of an hour, unable to move, wondering if he could ever manage to escape. As soon as he could stand up, however, he tried again. His hands were trembling and he had lost his strength. This time he put his head through first, then an arm, then, though dislocating his shoulder while doing so, the other arm. Once he had got his chest through the rest was easy. Hanging on to the bars, he pulled his legs out, jumped and landed on his feet. At last he was in the street—and free!

Fortunately, any noise he made was covered up by the sound of a horse pawing the ground in the stable just across the road. So now he quietly put on his clothes, slung his sack over his shoulder, tucked his shoes under his arms, and walked away. There was a cyclist coming towards him: Deschamps dived into a vegetable garden, and for 200 yards he had to pick his way through vegetable plots and water-ducts, and clamber over hedges and fences, before reaching the open country where he felt at home. He knew he had to make for the north, so he followed the Pole star; after walking for above five miles he stopped, and stretched himself out behind a hedge to wait for daylight. A badger came up and sniffed him. . . .

At dawn he could see where stakes were planted in the ground 200 hundred feet or so apart, marking the frontier. Getting to his feet, he walked past them—and was the first escaped French prisoner of war to set foot in Lithuania. This was on August 8th 1940.

Alas, on his arrival he was greeted with heartrending news. At the first long conversation that he was able to have in French with the Polish Colonel Rudniski, he heard that France had fallen. The Germans, Deschamps told us, had announced the capture of Paris, the occupation of France, and the armistice. "But," he said, "I never believed them. I left Germany thinking that the French were still fighting. It was Colonel Rudniski who asked me if I had heard of General de Gaulle and who told me what he had done. From then on, I kept asking the Russians to let me join de Gaulle's forces."

1943—The Croix de la Libération was posthumously awarded to Corporal Pierre Deschamps with the following citation:

"He was an example of unassuming heroism, and won the admiration of his superiors and comrades of 'Combat' by accomplishing the most perilous missions with the most steadfast courage.

"He met with a glorious death when for the last time he bore arms to face the enemy, who dishonoured themselves by mutilating his dead body.

"France will not forget his final sacrifice."

## V

### HENRY CLAYE'S ESCAPE

**I** MET him for the first time in Russia. He was bending over a basin and washing his hands: he had the build of a wrestler and the huge muscles of his arms stood out beneath his rolled-up shirtsleeves. . . . When he had finished washing he put on his rings and called out to me in a

husky voice: "So you are the newcomer?" (Having reached Russia four months ago he looked upon himself as an old-stager.) "Where do you come from?" "From Paris," I replied. "Paris. . . . Paris. . . ." He repeated this word several times as though it had a magical significance, then turning to me confidentially, "Do you remember," he said, "the film in which Jean Gabin says to Mirelle Balin, 'You smell of the Métro. . . .' Well, old man, I have had to travel 2500 miles to find out what he meant. What would I not give to smell that smell of the Métro again, and on a woman."

This was Henry Claye.

Most men have two loves; Henry Claye had two prides: first, that he was a man, secondly that he hailed from Paris, and not just anywhere in Paris, not but from Barbès. Who cares which of the cafés of the Place Pigalle he used to frequent before the war; or that his photograph appeared in art publications and that he 'played catch'? What matters is the fact that this 'tough guy' accomplished great feats.

The ordinary man in the street is a character in fiction without realising it, but Claye must have always known that he was just that. But he could never have guessed that imprisonment would one day cause him to embark on more heroic adventures than the cinema has ever depicted—because they would have been considered too far-fetched!—and that he would emerge with honour, bringing credit not only to himself, to Barbès and the Place Pigalle, but to France. His escape, like the feats he has accomplished in de Gaulle's army, was not a triumph of cunning (which he despises), nor of astuteness, but a triumph of energy. In Claye prehistoric man came to life again for a week in all his native simplicity. A hostile world surrounded him: he was confronted by monsters, hunger and thirst, and he went through the anguish of

the trapped beast. Yet, with no other weapon than his physical strength and his extraordinary powers of endurance, Claye fought his way to freedom.

He arrived in Germany at the beginning of August 1940 and was sent to a work camp in East Germany. He at once made up his mind to escape to the nearest country, Lithuania. Two of his comrades, Parisians of course, decided to throw in their lot with his, and they all began to make their preparations.

It was an enormous undertaking. They would have to cover 100 miles on foot (the distance from the frontier as the crow flies); not one of them knew German, they knew nothing about the locality, they had no maps, no compass, no money and no means of obtaining money. Their main concern was to escape before the cold weather came, and they were certain that once they had managed to get outside the camp all would be well.

It was not at all easy to get out of the camp. The Germans had turned the hut where they slept into a regular prison: the window was covered with a grille which was bolted from outside with ten huge bolts; the door was locked, and at night, reinforced with iron bars. Moreover, to prevent the prisoners from escaping, the guards used to lock up their clothes every night.

Overcoming such obstacles was child's play for the three friends. Claye, while at work, managed to get hold of a large pair of pliers, and as soon as he got the chance, he hid behind some friends and undid all the bolts down one side of the window-grille. The grille remained in position but was no longer fastened. The problem of clothes was also settled in no time, as several prisoners had, besides their uniform, a spare outfit of fatigue clothes; as for shoes, there were just enough extra pairs in the hut to enable the three plotters to keep theirs back at night.

Everything seemed to be going satisfactorily, and they fixed their date of departure for August 23rd.

The whole scheme almost failed, just because of one pair of shoes. On the night of their escape, when the time came to collect the shoes for the night, the Hut's fifty-third pair of shoes had disappeared. Everything was turned upside down (discreetly however, so as not to arouse suspicion) to find the missing pair. At last, after a thorough search, the shoes were found; it appeared their owner had simply gone to sleep after hiding them as he always did. Claye calmly handed them to the soldier in charge of collecting shoes.

Then the hut was locked up and lights put out. Claye slipped a fatigue dress over his uniform which was far too conspicuous; he had come all the way to Germany with a pair of riding breeches and long fawn gaiters, and had also brought his field-glasses, his camera and his magnificent hunting knife. He was determined not to leave any of his precious possessions behind for the use of the Germans. His two comrades only had their private's uniform, without even a fatigue coat to camouflage them. The three men waited for a while, then shook hands with a few friends; they were just about to set off when the tragedy occurred. One of the three bumped into a man asleep near the window, who woke up and began grumbling. He happened to be the owner of the unlucky pair of shoes, and again, as luck would have it, the first thing he noticed was that his shoes had disappeared. While Claye was opening the window, twisting the grille back, and was about to slide down the outside wall, the owner of the shoes began to kick up a terrible row and the whole hut resounded with his shouts. Claye climbed back into the hut and went up to the man.

"You are making such a din you'll have the sentry here in a moment. I warn you: I have got a knife here. If the

sentry comes in, I will stick my knife into his stomach." It was obvious that he meant it; the man shut up, and the three prisoners were able to climb out without any further hitch.

As the sentry was patrolling up and down on the other side of the hut, the three men went straight to the provisions hut. They had made keys to unlock the door, but alas, their keys were round when they should have been flat.

So, besides having no map and no compass, they had no food. For a moment they wondered if they were insane to start out so badly equipped. Coming from Paris was not like coming from the country and knowing where to find potatoes and beet-roots and how to cook them. If they had realised what a handicap this entire lack of provisions was going to prove, they might have postponed their escape—but they were not going to let themselves be held up by such a trifling thing as food! They had made up their minds to leave and nothing was going to stop them. So they jumped over the barbed-wire network of the camp and plunged into open country with only the stars to direct them.

On the very first night of their escape they had their first alarm. While they were walking along the road, in single file, with Claye bringing up the rear, towards half-past two in the morning they heard the sound of hoofs behind them. "It must be a cow following us," said Claye. He looked round: the cow turned out to be a mounted policeman wearing a brown shirt and with a Swastika on his armlet. The policeman kept up a volley of questions which none of them understood. As he persisted in pestering them, Claye, still walking, turned on him and shouted in French: "Well, what's wrong?" He looked so ferocious that the policeman turned round and

galloped away. But they all three knew that within ten minutes they would have a whole company on their heels.

They decided to take cover at once. There was a little bridge over a stream just ahead of them. They examined it carefully and found that it was supported by three large beams. In a flash each of the three men had climbed along a beam and hidden under the superstructure of the bridge. Sure enough, within less than ten minutes a patrol arrived and began searching for them all over the place. They even went down into the stream to look for them. With thumping hearts, the three men could see the butt-ends of the rifles moving about below, almost at arm's length. Luckily they could not be seen in the dark, and none of the soldiers bothered to hoist themselves up under the bridge. Before long the patrol moved off and all was well.

When they had given the soldiers time to get back to the town, the three men set off again. It was getting late and they would soon have to look for somewhere to spend the daylight hours. Being quite unfamiliar with the country, they had fully expected to find a suitable shelter, a mill for example. There was not anything of the sort in sight, and it was dawn already. They could hear the church bells striking five. While they were still wondering where to find shelter, they noticed that a peasant had laid some boards across a ditch by the side of the road, for his cattle to walk over.

It seemed a good hiding-place, so they began to crawl under the boards. Claye, with his huge build, found it almost impossible to wriggle in, but at last all three of them had got inside and they decided to stay there. They lay in the ditch, one man's feet touching the next one's head, with the planks just above them, like the lid of a coffin—and there they were stuck for the whole day, without a scrap of food. Even if they had had food with

them, they were so tightly packed that they would not have had elbow-room to get it to their mouths! To make matters worse a storm blew up and the rain poured down all day long, filling the ditch so that the three men felt as though they had been tied up and thrown into a scwer. It was nine o'clock at night before they dare extricate themselves from their hiding-place. Then, aching all over, they set out again.

Fortunately, the next twenty-four hours were fairly uneventful. They were inclined to quarrel because they did not agree on where the cast lay; they occasionally walked in the wrong direction; they played hide and seek with the railway officials in the goods-yards at Insterburg and had to throw themselves flat on the ground and hide under a train—but such things were the common lot of all prisoners trying to escape. August 25th was only marked by one alarm, and that a comic one. They were spending the day hiding under a railway bridge. While one of them was busy relieving himself beside the line, a railway worker was seen approaching, and the unfortunate Frenchman, caught in the act, had to throw himself into the nettles with no protection for his legs.

Food continued to be the worst problem. For the first forty-eight hours they had not had a morsel to eat, and when they set out on their third night's walk they felt weak from the start. Nevertheless, they kept on along the railway track until half-past four in the morning. By then they began to suffer terrible pangs of hunger. They picked up potatoes and ate them raw, but were sick immediately afterwards. They made no attempt to cook them—and perhaps they didn't know how to! By hook or by crook they must get food, so Claye, who was less likely to be recognised as an escaped prisoner because of the fatigue dress he was wearing, set off alone towards a large farm. He climbed a wall, drew near to the farm buildings and



tried to get into what he thought might be a store-room. It was useless: all was securely locked up. He turned away dejected.

As he was about to climb back over the wall he saw something come panting behind him. Looking round he noticed an enormous German sheep dog about to leap on him. A door stood open only a yard or so away, but could he reach it? Claye stood still with the sweat pouring down his face, the dog watching him closely. Very slowly, hardly raising his feet from the ground, Claye slowly edged his way towards the door. Reaching the doorway and taking a deep breath he leapt through, slamming the door behind him. The dog pounced too late, barking furiously. Claye was so overwrought that he had to lean up against a tree to steady himself. Then he went back to his comrades growling: "We shall have to tighten our belts another hole!"

It was almost daylight and high time to take cover. Near the road was a field which had recently been cleared of tree stumps, leaving holes in which they could lie curled up. There they spent the 26th of August, devoured by mosquitoes and unable to move because of the passers-by on the road only thirty yards away. And still they had nothing to eat.

It rained all day long. . . .

On the fourth night they could hardly walk and their hunger was agonising. Claye was still active, but his friends were on their last legs. Towards midnight, when they were near a group of houses, Claye, who was by now an expert in night reconnaissance, went off alone through the fields towards the church.

At the end of a field he came to a meadow, and then to a large white wall. He climbed over, let himself slide down on the other side. Somehow it seemed a long drop. On looking around he found he was at the bottom of a

pit ten feet deep. He touched the sides which were dead straight and slimy with mud. He could only take a few steps in either direction: he was trapped. It was impossible to get out! He tried hoisting himself up, cutting steps with his knife: quite useless, because the mud slithered beneath his feet, and he fell back, the sweat pouring down and his throat parched.

His two friends began to grow uneasy at his absence, and set out to look for him. They also walked towards the church and climbed over the white wall. Luckily when they landed on the other side they were near enough for Claye to hear them. He began to whistle and call them in hoarse whispers so as not to wake up the villagers. At last they heard him and in the dark they tried to discover his exact position. "Where are you?" they called under their breath. "Here, here," he called back in a deathly voice. It was only after an hour and a half that poor Claye was hauled out of his pit. He looked round him: there were white slabs of stone everywhere. He shivered with horror when he realised that he was in a cemetery, and that the deep black pit where he thought he was stuck for ever, was a freshly dug grave waiting for a dead man!

At dawn, on August 27th, the little band took shelter in a copse about seventy yards from the road. Their adventures in the cemetery had taken their minds off their hunger, but now that they had calmed down again they began to feel the pangs more acutely than ever. They could not even sleep. "My comrades," said Claye afterwards, "were so played out that although I was pretty nearly done myself, I had to spend my time trying to pump a little strength into them."

Towards the early afternoon, Claye could hold out no longer. It was impossible to wait till nightfall: he set off in broad daylight towards a near-by farm. He opened the

gate. The house looked dead. He looked round him: what should he see lying between double window-panes but three rows of tomatoes, which had been put there to ripen in the sun. What luck? He was just slipping his hand through the outer window when an old man's face peered at him through the inside window. He drew his hand back like lightning.

The old man opened the window, leant out, and began to speak. Claye did not lose his head: he had to do something, and so he pretended to be dumb. He began to gesticulate, pointing to his throat with a helpless look and uttering inarticulate sounds. Then he drew a piece of paper from his pocket, on which he had asked a friend at the camp to write in German "Strasse nach Riga?" (The road to Riga?), in case of emergency. The man looked at the paper, but did not seem to understand. He gazed with growing suspicion at this haggard tramp, who had not shaved for four days, and went on making hysterical sounds. Having at last deciphered the writing, he pointed towards a road. Claye could only walk away with his tail between his legs.

When he neared the gate, he found some hens in his path. Claye is not one to let this kind of opportunity slip. He was careful to leave the door ajar, and the hens followed into the road. A clump of trees hid all this from the farmer and his wife. Claye let a couple of hens get ahead of him, and then shoed them towards the wood where his friends were on the look-out for him. By the time he reached them they had already wrung one hen's neck, torn off its feathers and were devouring the flesh. Claye had become too primitive to be sickened by this sight, and rushed towards them to get his share. He secured the two drumsticks, which he promptly stripped clean. "It tasted more or less like chicken; but it was warm, as though still alive. Ghastly!" He swallowed the raw gizzard

as well as an egg which the hen had been about to lay.

Then the three men looked at one another with shining eyes, and smiled. For the first time since their departure they no longer felt hungry.

This savage satisfaction was, alas, short-lived: before long they were all suffering from violent diarrhoea, which left them weak and incapable of anything except sleeping.

Somehow Claye could not rest. He was too anxious. He had seen the farmer's wife set out along the road and he was afraid that she had gone to warn the police. Every time he began to fall asleep, he felt the need to get up and look around. Before long he saw in the distance the farmer's wife now accompanied by an armed platoon. He quickly shook his comrades out of their sleep and warned them that the man-hunt was on again.

The presence of danger lent them new strength. They took to their heels and fled, skirting farms, ducking behind hedges, and dodging from one clump of trees to another. They must have travelled in a circle for they found themselves on the main road, behind the soldiers. They had always avoided walking along a road in broad daylight, but this time they had no alternative. They followed at a distance, walking slowly; just when they thought they were out of danger, they saw the armed platoon coming back towards them. Some peasant must have put their pursuers on their track again, they had split up into search parties and were combing the woods. It was obvious that although they had not yet been spotted they soon would be, and that if they remained on the high road they would be caught. The best thing to do was to take cover again. They went into a potato field and lay flat on the ground, not more than twenty yards from the road. The sound of tramping feet came closer. Now the soldiers were on a level with them—some scattered to search a little wood before rejoining the main body of the

platoon. They were walking straight on past their hiding-place. . . . Now they had passed . . . .

Dusk fell at last on this eventful day. At 9 p.m. the three men set out again, walked all night long, and found themselves at 3.30 a.m. on August 28th at the entrance to Tilsit. Without waiting for daylight they climbed up on a railway bridge, lay down alongside the track and went fast asleep.

The next day was still one of starvation, but worse than this, it was a return to civilisation. They were startled out of their sleep by the sound of cars hooting: it was already 9 o'clock in the morning, and below them, there were buses, cyclists and pedestrians passing under the bridge. Then they realised with horror that they had chosen a spot which was plainly visible to anyone who happened to look upward, and that if no one had spotted them already, it must be because there is a god who watches over fugitives! As soon as the road was clear for a minute, they clambered down from their pedestal and plunged into the first little wood they could find.

Towards the end of the morning, what should they see on the road only a few yards away but a band of 50 French prisoners, guarded by German soldiers, marching past on their way to work. This depressing sight reminded them of what they themselves had been only a week ago. It was better to be outcasts and starve to death than to be thrown back into that herd of slaves: this they felt so deeply that when evening came they found new strength to set out again.

But they were not through with Tilsit yet. They decided to follow the course of the river, thinking that this would be the best way to skirt the town. Alas, far from avoiding the town they landed right in the middle of one of its most popular parks. It was crowded with loving couples, soldiers arm in arm with their *Gretchen*, tête-à-

tête in the arbours. It looked as though the entire garrison of Tilsit had been ordered out to learn the art of love. In the midst of this 'Fête Galante' all they could do was hide behind tree-trunks.

As the clocks were striking eleven there was a blare of trumpets in the neighbouring barracks, and one after the other, Don Juans in field-grey returned to their quarters; the park was deserted, except for a small group of officers who were talking together on a bridge. This bridge they must cross if they were ever to get out of the park and reach the frontier. They took off their forage caps and jackets and walked boldly past the officers without arousing suspicion.

Two hours later they reached the banks of the Niemen. What a strange coincidence that these three pathetic soldiers of a defeated France should have reached the river at the precise spot where, a hundred and thirty years ago, Napoleon had discussed the future of the world with the Tsar Alexander of Russia! Time and time again, from Friedland to Tilsit, from Lützen to Eylau, French prisoners passed thus under the shadow of Napoleon.

Still they had to find a way to cross the Niemen. They were far too exhausted to swim across, and it seemed hopeless to try to find a boat. This only left the bridge, or rather a series of three steel bridges which stretched from one bank to the other, 1000 feet long. But the bridges were lighted up, and most certainly guarded. Encouraged by their success in the park, they decided to take the risk. They walked steadily across the bridge, keeping as close to the railings as possible so as to be out of the rays of the lamp-posts. On each of the three bridges there were two sentries guarding the middle road. Six times the Frenchmen called out "Heil Hitler!", and six times the sentries replied "Heil Hitler!" They had crossed the Niemen!

After they had spent another day resting and still without food, they set out again on the evening of August 29th for the last lap of their journey. Already the frontier seemed quite close, probably less than 15 miles away. Without this consoling thought they could never have endured their utter exhaustion and their ravenous hunger, and might even have abandoned the struggle. But it was now certain that this was to be their last night, and that within a few hours they would have crossed the frontier . . . or lost their lives.

This thought spurred them on, although they were dead-beat and could hardly stand or drag themselves along. They walked mechanically, stumbling at every step. Unfortunately they did not know the exact position of the frontier, and just when they needed to be most on the alert they hardly had the strength to hold their heads up. Then, to crown everything, they began to quarrel. This was the time when they should have been most united; yet at this precise moment the man whom they called 'the Engineer' said he could walk better by himself than in a gang. He crossed over to the other side of the road and stubbornly refused to join the other two. So they staggered on, two men on one side of the road, and one on the other, so that Henry Claye, whose exceptionally strong constitution enabled him to stand up to the strain better than his two comrades, had to go from one man to the other to keep up their courage.

Suddenly, just as they were leaving the slumbering village, they saw three lights coming towards them on the road. In the distance it looked like bicycle lamps, and they supposed it must be workers returning home from night work. But the lights did not seem to come any closer. Though this struck them as curious, they were too worn out to be able to act with caution. Then as they approached the lights and were about to walk past them

they were startled by a hoarse shout of "Wer da? Halt!" and three German soldiers sprang up between the lights.

"Franzosen—do not fire!" shrieked 'the Engineer' who had almost walked into the sentry-box and now saw a gun levelled at his chest. At this cry, the sentries hesitated. The other two Frenchmen seized the opportunity to leap into a little side road. Bullets were whistling all around. Claye realised that it would be fatal to stay on this road in the line of fire. Followed by his comrade he sprang across the road and dived into the fields. Within a few moments he heard the heavy thud of a body falling to the ground. There was no need for him to look round to realise that he was now alone. . . .

The sound of firing continued while Claye tore at full speed across country. Without stopping, he reflected that it would be wisest to take a bold course. When he had left the sentry-post a mile and a half behind he returned to the main road, where no one would expect to find him. He was bathed in sweat, dead-beat and desperate. He never slackened his pace, however, but for an hour or more plunged straight on, falling down time after time and picking himself up again. In his mind there was only one thought: "I must get through."

But what were those lights in front of him? Was it hallucination, or had he come to another sentry-post, another trap? This time he had learnt his lesson. He left the road and again took to the fields on his left. He was among wheat-sheaves and he decided to cross the field by dodging from one sheaf to another. He had not progressed very far when he saw a beam of light sweep across the ground and settle on him. His heart stood still. The beam of light was not coming from the main road but from an unexpected road on his left, running parallel to the main road. When his eyes had grown accustomed to the glare, he could make out the form of the man behind the beam.



It was a soldier. The fact that he was so near his goal gave him fresh courage. He leapt forward to the next sheaf. The beam of light followed him. With his heart knocking wildly against his ribs he asked himself why the alarm had not been given, and why he was not being fired at. . . . He made another leap forward. . . . No, he had not been spotted. It was just an illusion. The beam of light left him and began sweeping the sheaves. Slowly the soldier moved away. . . .

Claye continued his advance among the wheat-sheaves. In spite of his exhaustion he had never felt more tensely on the alert.

Walking doubled up, or crawling on all fours, he at last reached a little wood surrounded by a hedge. Gingerly, he made a gap in the hedge and began to push his way through. Suddenly, just in front of him, there was a man squatting beside the hedge, probably a sentry. Whether he was there by chance or was waiting for him, Claye does not know to this day. At the time he acted instantaneously.

"The fellow was more surprised than I was," says Claye. "I seized him by the arms and gave him a kick. He fell over backwards. Without pausing I hit him in the face. Then as he was moaning, I gave him several kicks in the jaw, and in the ribs. I don't know whether I killed him or not, but at all events, he can't have many teeth left. If I had known for certain that he was a Hun, I should have knifed him."

When this job was finished Claye set out once more across country. He went through several more fields, fell into some water when he least expected to, and pushed on until the water was up to his neck. He came out on the bank on the other side of what must have been a river. Wet as he was, he continued to walk at a good speed for some time. Suddenly he was surprised to see, right before him, a soldier who was not a German. He was a Russian,

wearing a peaked cap and the red star. Claye could hardly believe his eyes. When he got to the village, he saw a poster bearing the words "Kaunas printers". It was only then that he knew for certain he was in Lithuania.

Claye was wet through and ravenously hungry. Now that the tension was over he felt exhausted and stupified. A man was coming towards him. "Good morning, sir," said Claye in French. The man looked at him with amazement. "Embassy! Consulate!" implored Claye. The man understood, pulled out a piece of paper and wrote "125 miles." That was too far. "Police!" demanded Claye—Claye, the escaped prisoner and the Free Frenchman! The time was exactly 4.40 a.m. and the date August 30th 1940.

## VI

### POLISH ESCAPES

THE man whom you pass in the street, on your way back from Kommando work, is a Pole. He doesn't look at you; he doesn't speak to you. To-morrow he may be cudgelled to death by a Feldwebel; to-morrow, his children whom he has not seen for three years, may be ordered to break up ice with sticks of dynamite in an East Prussian camp. For this Pole, the battle for Poland goes on; it never ceases for a moment. The word 'collaboration' only has one meaning for him: to fight side by side with those who share his hatred of the Germans. For this man, old alliances still hold good. If you make an imperceptible sign to him, he looks as though he hasn't noticed it. But that very evening, or the next day, or within a week, at the very first opportunity you will find him beside you. Through him you will learn that the

whole population is ready to help you. If you mention the question of escape to him, you will find that one evening, under cover of darkness, someone has slipped you a bundle of civilian clothes, or some white bread. You exchange a few whispered words behind a wall . . . and a worker from Cracow or from Balberg, someone whom the Germans trust, slips a piece of paper into your pocket: your new identity papers and permits, which have been printed in some little office in Posen, and have been secretly transmitted from hand to hand across the 'pacified' provinces. Jews and Catholics may not like one another, but they stand united at your side to give you advice and help on your way.

A gesture or a look is often sufficient for a Pole to risk his life on your behalf. A column of French prisoners is being led to work one early morning. Suddenly, while the sentries are not looking, one of the prisoners dives into the ditch by the side of the road. He is followed by a second, and a third. No one has seen them except a peasant woman on her way to work. She is a Pole. She sees that they are French, and knows that if they remain in the open country they will find no shelter and will be recaptured. She walks back to her barn, steps inside for a moment, and then comes out again, purposely leaving the door ajar. She makes a tiny sign to the prisoners, so imperceptible that unless you were desperately on the alert you would never have noticed it. This sign means: "Don't remain in that ditch. You'll be caught and beaten to death. There's my barn; use it." Then she disappears into the field. Not a word has been spoken. The three men slip into the barn: they find that the peasant woman has even placed a ladder under the loft, so that they can climb up and bury themselves in the warmth of the hay until nightfall.

They will never see this peasant woman again. They

will never be able to thank her. They don't even know her name, and probably have never seen her face. That night they leave the barn—and to-day they are in London. Their names are: Carpentier, Graven and Arnoux.

The help which we received from the Poles went far beyond the mere gift of bread and wine. All of us who had the opportunity of coming into contact with Poles were so aware of this that many of them, who were prisoners in East Prussia or in the Polish Corridor, preferred making a *détour* of several dozen miles in order to travel through Polish territory. Out of the 186, there are at least 25 of us who were helped by Poles, and 17 of them travelled through Poland. These 17 men, as well as the innumerable Frenchmen who were recaptured by the Germans while they were trying to escape, can all testify that the Poles never once failed in their loyalty.\*

Some people thought that noble devotion was a thing of the past. It belongs to all time. Quixotic self-sacrifice is not exclusively 'romantic'. Every proud nation retains the secret of heroism without glory, and when it has fallen beneath the enemy's yoke, it rediscovers the value of the most humble virtues.

It is strange that we, who had not seen France since 1940, should have experienced German occupation and terrorism in a country that was not our own, and have learnt the meaning of popular resistance from the example of the Poles. When we saw the Germans pillaging and shooting in Poland, we never guessed that France was to experience, or rather that she was already experiencing, the German shooting of hostages. When we saw, in

\*I have already spoken of the debt of gratitude which the French in prison camps in Poland owe to the population. I should like to mention that it was only thanks to the help of Polish civilians that the French and English prisoners in the various camps in Poland were able to survive during the first weeks of captivity. At Niegeizewo the Pole had to pay a tax to the sentries before being authorised to bring food to the prisoners, but nothing deterred them in their kindness and generosity.

Poland, what an underground organisation was like, or a clandestine newspaper, we never suspected that France was already undergoing the hard and bloody apprenticeship of underground movements. Of what captive France was capable, Poland showed us by her example.

No doubt Poland was able to adapt herself more readily to this kind of warfare. During centuries of slavery, underground activity had been her only means of resisting oppression, and it was this time-long experience that gave the Poles their love of conspiracy and their genius for organising clandestine action. Burning faith in the destiny of their country, combined with a passionate, everlasting and unwavering hatred of Germany, caused the Poles to form a vast and secret network of underground activity throughout their country. And it was thanks to this network, and to the Pole's great love of France, that we received so much help.

When one or other of our prisoners arrived in Poland, he would be amazed to find himself suddenly protected by a powerful secret organisation, which it was impossible to track down, which functioned everywhere and was obeyed by everyone. He would be immediately provided with money and civilian clothes. Strange guides would lead him to Warsaw by train. There he would spend a couple of weeks, his only orders being to change addresses every two days and not to ask his host's real name. His host would bring him clandestine newspapers and translate them to him, and he would be able to follow the desperate course of the resistance movement. One night a German officer would be stabbed near a crucifix; another night three S.S. men would be seized and thrown over the railings of a bridge. These were minute episodes in a gigantic struggle, but each one was followed by terrible reprisals. The inhabitants of the village situated nearest the scene of action would be put before a firing

squad, after having been made to dig their own graves.

After the prisoner had spent a fortnight in hiding, he would find that his journey to Russia had been entirely organised for him, the route mapped out and a relay of guides chosen to escort him. He would cross the frontier without knowing whom to thank.

One prisoner, who crossed Poland from one end to the other, arrived in a town on a bicycle. A complete stranger beckoned to him and took him to his house to question him: "Who are you? . . . Have you got a bicycle permit? Why isn't your mudguard painted white?" The escaped prisoner told him his story. Although he couldn't give him a bicycle permit, the man immediately produced a pot of white paint and painted his mudguard. Then he told the prisoner how to cross the river. He must avoid the bridges as they were all guarded, but he should follow the towpath upstream, and after four miles he would find someone to ferry him across; the signal would be the caw of a crow. . . .

Thus Poland of 1940 resembled heroic Poland of 1830 and 1863, with the same courage in the face of danger and the same nobility in misfortune. The whole population was infused with one violent passion. When faced with the Germans, everyone, from the peasant in the poorest village to the cosmopolitan nobleman or the Warsaw intellectual, knew what to do. And just as each one resisted and fought the Germans in his own way, so each one of them was ready to help the French. They needed no orders, and it was as a matter of course that they sheltered an escaped prisoner. One only had to knock at the windowpane of any Polish farm, at any hour of the day or night, and say: "I am French," for the door to be opened at once. Twelve escaped prisoners managed to cross a whole Polish province by stages, and by stopping at any farm they happened to choose. Not a single Pole

denounced them, and not a single Pole refused to give them shelter. And this in spite of the fact that in every village there were huge posters stuck up outside the Mayor's house, saying that whoever sheltered an escaped prisoner would be shot without trial.

The French soldier Leblond had escaped from his Kommando twelve days ago. His associates had been killed and he himself had only managed to survive thanks to his presence of mind. He was dead tired. While he was resting behind a bush he heard the sound of voices quite close by. It was peasants talking to one another and often using the words "tak, tak," which is Polish for 'yes'. So Leblond was in Poland! A little way off there was a sullen-faced old peasant working alone at the edge of a field. Leblond went up to him and said: "I . . . Franzous soldier!" The man's face was immediately transfigured. He gave Leblond a look that he will remember all his life: tender and glistening with tears, as though he had suddenly recognised the son of a very dear friend. He was so overcome with emotion that he was unable to speak, but merely threw a jacket over Leblond's shoulders and made him put on a pair of overalls. Then, with nervous glances to the right and left—because there were German soldiers in the vicinity—he led the Frenchman to his house.

He had looked discreetly into Leblond's haversack and saw that there were only a few raw potatoes in it, still covered with earth. He made Leblond sit down at his own table and fetched him bread and cream, the food which shepherds always offered their guests in ancient legends. While Leblond was eating, the peasant gazed at him lovingly, with the same tenderness that the father of the Prodigal Son must have displayed on his son's first night home.

When the meal was over, the man led Leblond to a

farm three miles away, where the owner could speak French. The latter said that he would be honoured if the Frenchman would stay at his farm. That evening a stranger, who also spoke French, knocked at the door. He had come to bring the news of the Russian occupation of Lithuania, and to let the Frenchman know that the French Consulate had been closed down, but that the British Consulate was probably still open. As soon as there was any fresh news it would be communicated to him.

In the meantime, Leblond was sent to a third farm, which was less liable to be searched. He was greeted with the words: "My house is yours. Make yourself absolutely at home, and stay here until victory if you care to." Leblond remained in this house for fifteen days. Every attention was showered on him, and if he left, it was only because of his overwhelming desire to take up arms again.

No one was ever refused hospitality in Poland, even in the poorest homes. Carpentier and his friends walked into a very poor farm, which consisted of only one room with a mud floor where chickens were running about. They were greeted by a woman in rags, surrounded by a family of squalling children. When they saw such poverty they wanted to apologise for their intrusion and try some other farm. These people would not hear of it, but insisted on sharing their meagre food with the Frenchmen. As soon as dusk fell the husband led them to the near-by river. In spite of the bitter cold, the man only had rags wrapped round his feet. He helped the three men into a tiny boat, which was so light and frail that when he got in himself the water almost came over the sides. Although Carpentier had not asked for help, the man wished to ferry them across the river. Rowing slowly through the cold mist, with ice floating dangerously near them, the man took them to the opposite bank.



Sometimes there were comic episodes during these Polish escapades, and there is nothing to beat a combination of Frenchmen and Poles when they set out to fool the Germans.

Heurgon and Mathieu had arrived in the frontier zone. Not knowing which route to take, they knocked at the door of a country house towards eleven o'clock at night. The owner of the house invited them in for supper. His charming and hospitable wife made them a gigantic omelette. They were all merry-making in the dining-room when, all of a sudden, they heard the sound of tramping feet outside. In a trice, the Frenchmen were bundled into the adjoining room. Through the partition they could hear the Germans talking and laughing coarsely. The Frenchmen felt extremely wretched, especially when they realised that they had left their haversacks and their packets of French cigarettes lying in the room. They felt quite certain that their last hour had come, and every moment seemed an eternity.

A quarter of an hour later, the beautiful lady of the house reappeared, carrying their haversacks and the omelette which they had not had time to finish. "I've given them another omelette," she said smilingly. While the Germans were busy eating in the dining-room, the Frenchmen were feasting in the bedroom. Before long, the frontier guards began to drop asleep, and the prisoners could hear them snoring just on the other side of the wall.

One can stand up to a great many things, but when one has been fasting for over a year, one cannot eat too much omelette without suffering for it. Heurgon spent the whole night battling with acute indigestion. It was one long nightmare. The slightest noise might arouse the Germans' suspicions, and then, not only would they be discovered, but their hosts would be compromised, and no doubt shot. Heurgon spent the most agonising night

of his whole life. At long last, towards three o'clock in the morning, the Germans got up and went away, and Hcurgon was able to vomit to his heart's content. . . . Only a few hours later, when the sun rose, they were on the other side of the frontier.

Perhaps the most moving experience that we have gained from the war was the discovery of Polish friendship, both among the townspeople and the peasants. We all knew that our countries had been bound together by ties of friendship throughout the centuries, but we never dreamt that a Polish peasant could believe more strongly in the future of France than some Frenchmen themselves do, and that the Germans' seizure of Paris horrified the Poles almost as much as the capture of Warsaw. Nor did we guess that because of their love of France the Poles would receive us into their homes like sons and brothers. The Germans, with spiteful naïveté, had reminded us of the past greatness of France. But in Poland the French were reminded of the present greatness of France, and how the world misses her. In each Polish heart we saw the ideal France—France as she deserves to be loved and as we wish her to be loved.

## VII

### MITCHURIN

AT last we had crossed the frontier—the scene of so many dramas. We had escaped from Hitler, and, with joyful hearts, we plunged into the unknown because the unknown meant freedom. Every week or every fortnight, at some point or other of the symbolical line which divided two Empires, now at Memel, now at Ostrolenka, over the plains and marshes, usually through snow or mud, one

or more men would escape from the German hell, and come to the surface again like bubbles in a muddy pool. Then another prison would open to receive them.

Fate is cruel. The freedom which we longed for was denied us for the time-being. The Russians refused to grant us freedom because they themselves were determined to defend freedom. The Soviet Government expected to be involved in the war and it had seen the example of the many countries where fifth columnists had done so much harm. On principle the Russians suspected anything that came from Germany, above all anything that came illicitly. Consequently, they were afraid to send us back to Vichy in case there were a spy in our midst. As for allowing us to join the forces of de Gaulle, as most of us wished, their anxiety to preserve neutrality prevented them from doing this. And so, they kept us in Russia.

This was the beginning of a new chapter in our lives. Prison life in Germany was an experience which we shared with the immense army of men imprisoned there, but the Russian experience is our very own. By the mere fact of escaping, we had broken away from the fate of the majority of prisoners. But we were still only individual prisoners who had made for the same destination. As soon as we reached Russia, however, we became a group of men bound by the same fate. The individual history of each prisoner ceases on his arrival at the frontier; once past the frontier, his story merges into that of a community.

Each man, on his arrival in Russia, had to spend a period in prison. As soon as the Russians saw that we were foreigners without a passport, they withdrew us from circulation. Any hair which we had managed to save from the German scissors was clipped right off, and we were subjected to meticulous cross-examination and identification. By this time we began to ask ourselves

whether we had been complete fools ever to have escaped at all.

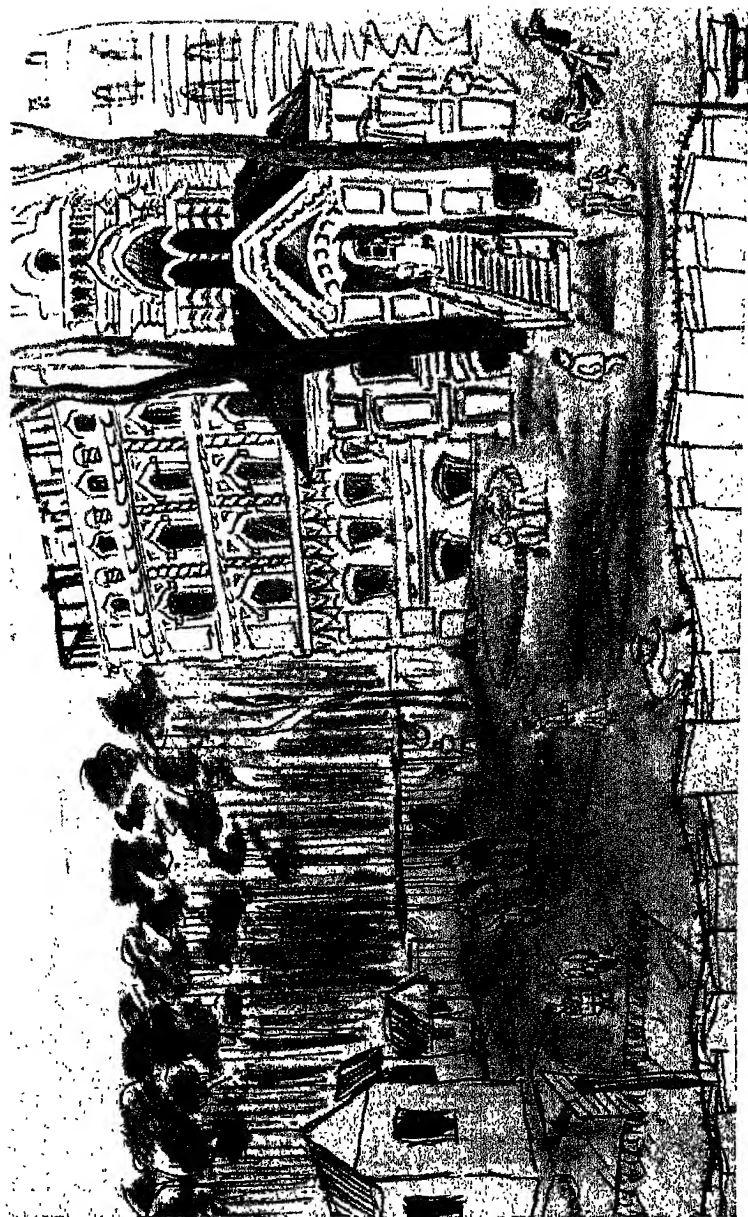
To add my little contribution to the events of this time, I should like to point out that the famous Moscow prison, Boutirki, provides its political prisoners (or at least some of them) with an excellent cuisine. It has shower-baths, decorated with blue and gold mosaics, and possesses the best de-lousing apparatus one could ever dream of. Moreover, when we were given permission to read, we were supplied—thanks to the enlightened choice of the Political Bureau officials—with three books which could not have been more aptly chosen for our circumstances: Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*, and *The Legend of Thyl Eulenspiegel* by Charles de Coster, a masterpiece which is too little known.

Our imprisonment was only temporary, of course, and after a few of us had enjoyed the doubtful delights of Moscow prisons, while others had to be content with the central prison of Smolensk, or even village jails (Oh Kretinga! Oh Toragué!), we were sent to join the other Frenchmen in the internment camp. The Soviet Government had decided on this regrouping of escaped French prisoners as early as October 1940. The first contingent, notably Fauvelle, Gand, Taxil, Deschamps, Claye, Boutoul, the sub-lieutenants Maistre and Cornillet, and the English warrant officer George Briggs, was gradually increased by fresh arrivals of escaped prisoners, up to the day when the invasion of Russia closed the gateway to the East to prisoners in Germany.

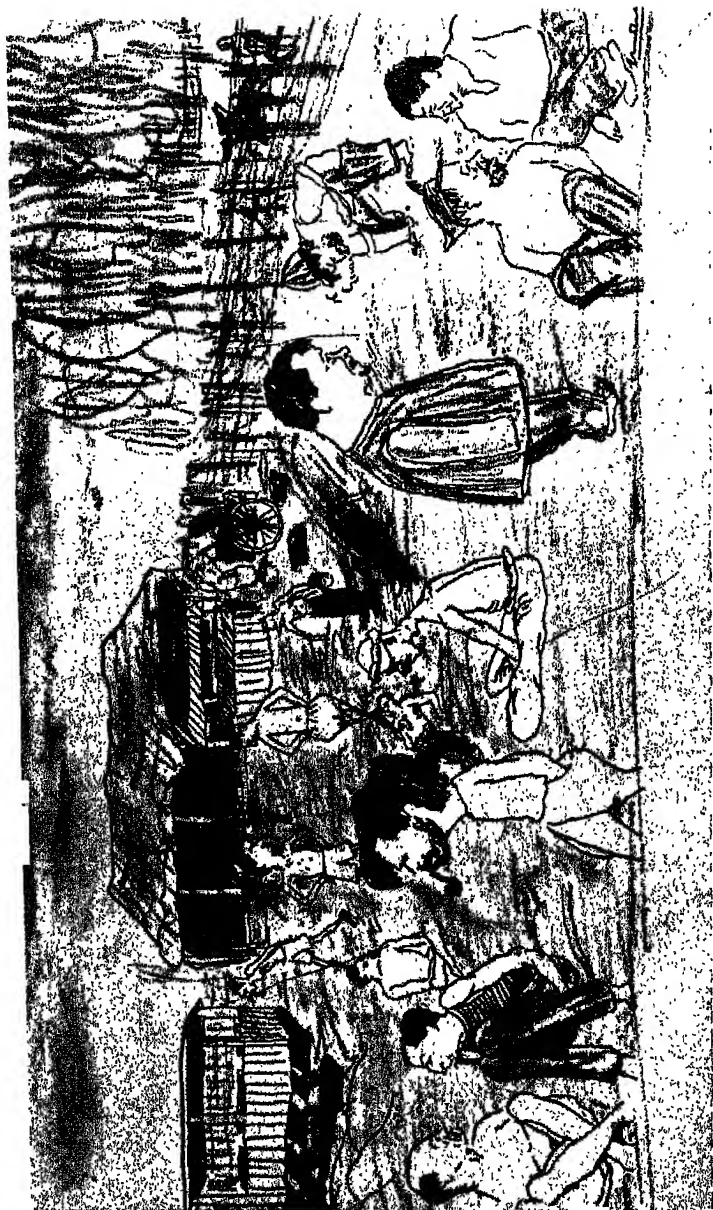
The place where we were assembled was named Mit-churin. It was situated near Kozielsk, about 200 miles to the south of Moscow, in the region between Kaluga and Orel which was the scene of such ferocious fighting during the winter 1941-1942. The house which the Russians placed at our disposal was a most surprising

building, something between a hunting pavilion and a Tartar palace. It had once been attached to a monastery, but had since been converted into a Rest Centre. It was a solid building, two storeys high, with whitewashed brick walls, arched windows in the Moorish style and pinnacles covered with arabesques. Over the entrance was a little tower, with a bell turret, and false windows on which one could see (although they had been partly effaced) figures of Christ painted on a gold background in the style of Byzantine mosaics or ancient ikons. There was a popular legend attached to this house. It was said that it, and the monastery to which it belonged, had been built long ago by a 'boyar' (a notorious robber like the famous Stephan Razin of Russian folklore), who, before dying, had devoted the proceeds of his robberies to pious foundations. Later, little villas had been built round the house and they too were given over to us when the main building became too crowded. Just in front of our house was a pavilion—the kind of thing country noblemen liked to build themselves in the days when French style dominated Europe. It was a curious building made of wood and painted red and salmon pink. A few steps led up to its main entrance, which consisted of a row of four white columns supporting a triangular pediment. This Trianon had been converted into a Kolkhosian cinema. There were a few mediocre statues dotted about the park, round which ran a wall with white turrets; these bore figures of Christ painted on a gold background. Beyond the wall the wild Russian forest stretched endlessly, with its huge umbrella pines rising high into the sky and catching all the colours of the setting sun on summer evenings. From the terrace of the house one had a view over a valley and, in the distance, a hill sprinkled with the wooden huts of the 'Kolkhose'.

I arrived at Mitchurin towards March 1st 1941, in the



AT MITCHURIN



AT GRAZIEVITCH

depth of winter which, in this part of the world, lasts until the middle of April. The earth had disappeared under a thick mantle of snow, sometimes over three feet deep. Our palace, like that of the Sleeping Beauty, locked as though it had been forgotten on the edge of the world, and life *itself seemed to have come to a standstill*. Round us stretched the vast silence of the Russian winter, static and colourless. There was no horizon, because, in the distance, the white clouds would merge into the white earth. The smoke that rose from the houses was just a faint atmospheric haze. Now and again a sledge passed noiselessly through the trees, drawn by a black horse and driven by a woman who whistled through her teeth.

Week after week passed by. . . .

But occasionally there were days of feverish excitement at Mitchurin: days when a new contingent of escaped prisoners arrived. The sleighs—or, in the springtime, the lorries—would draw up in front of the house. The new arrivals would climb up the steps, one by one, through the thronging crowd of ‘veterans’ who had come out to see them. Then they would sit down in the refectory and everyone would gather round to stare at them. Sometimes they were almost unrecognisable, even to their closest friends, because the hardships of the last few months in Germany, and of their escape, had altered them so much. Then they would begin to laugh and talk. They brought news of their camp, of friends left behind, and a little news from France—the kind of news one values, even if one knows it cannot be really true, because of one’s love for those who have written it. We would gaze in silence at the newcomers, at their haggard and unshaven faces, their cropped heads and poor ragged clothes. These wretched men, who had lost so much in France, had lost the rest in Germany . . . and during their days of escape they had wallowed in mud and torn them-



selves on barbed wire—all in order to win an imaginary freedom! Many of them arrived without hats; most of them had no socks and had walked through the snow in shoes which were falling to pieces. Sometimes their clothes were so worn-out that you could see their bare skin. Some of the more fortunate ones turned up in those black bonnets and padded coats which Russians wear during the cold season and which make them look like arctic explorers.

For the next week or so the newcomers would add their contribution of stories to the common stock. The Saint-Cyrien, Boissieu, would rag the friend who had escaped with him. 'Le Bazar', as he called him, was his junior. "When we reached the frontier, 'Le Bazar' wanted to lead the way, all alone, like a big chap, would you believe it? And all because he maintained that it was his privilege as the younger of the two!"

Guyon could hardly control his laughter when he described the Camp Commandant's reactions on the day after my escape. The colonel, escorted by his faithful orderly, had twice walked round the barbed-wire enclosure, looking for an imaginary gap. When he had to send in a report on our escape, the best conclusion he could come to was that we must have jumped over the barbed-wire network with the aid of a pole.

"So you've won the world championship in pole-jumping, old man! Do you hear that? You're the world champion!"

We tried to make Deschamps tell us his adventure, but he was always so reticent that one had to drag the words out of his mouth.

"They asked me to do some furniture-removing in a near-by house. . . . It was a hunting pavilion. . . . It belonged to a German general. I went there with the Germans. In the study I saw a map of the locality and I

took it. . . . I slipped it into my belt while no one was looking. . . .”

“And do you know who the general was?”

“Yes,” admitted Deschamps. “It was Goering.”

There are rest-houses of every kind; some for railway workers, some for old sailors, and some for worn-out society women. In France there was even a rest-house for retired writers. . . . I didn't think there has ever been a rest-house for escaped prisoners. But that is just what Mitchurin was . . . a rest-centre for escaped prisoners!

After the last war, escaped prisoners formed themselves into clubs and used to meet occasionally. But just imagine a club of escaped prisoners, living permanently in full session! Imagine a community composed exclusively of escaped prisoners, where from morning to night, day in and day out, you never meet anyone who is not an escaped prisoner! You will begin to understand what our camp was like, and the number of adventures we could tell one another, and how carefully some of us pieced our experiences together in order to make a consistent and polished narrative with which to win the respect of our native village and the admiration of our grandchildren! And who could blame us, cut off as we were from the rest of the world in that remote spot, so far away from the silent sufferings of France. In fact, we hardly suspected that these sufferings really existed. When one of us received the news that his young brother had been deported, by order of Vichy, and sent to work in an African dockyard, we could hardly believe it! Still . . . Mitchurin never resembled a rest-house for Old Comedians, because, in the first place, we are all young (the men we called ‘old’ were not more than forty), and secondly, at Mitchurin we all took a rigorous course in modesty. The naïve braggart, who might have been

tempted to look upon himself as the first prisoner to have escaped from Germany, would arrive at Mitchurin only to be confronted by a merciless council of escaped prisoners, very ready to put him in his place!

One grew so used to living in this atmosphere of escaped prisoners that, before long, one's own escape seemed so commonplace as to be quite dull. We were all escaped prisoners. We knew this; besides, how could we have been anything else?

There were a hundred, a hundred and fifty, two hundred Frenchmen in this remote spot—a kind of desert island. In Germany there was a whole army in prison camps, with its ready-made social structure, its habits and its discipline. But at Mitchurin everything had to be organised from scratch. Our community had its ups and downs, its passions, its hatreds, its dramas, its good and bad times. But each day that passed brought us nearer a better organised life; above all from the time when, in April 1941, Captain Billotte was recognised as our 'Starschi'—our representative and leader.

Once before, in Germany, we had been able to witness the miraculous way in which any community of Frenchmen, brought together by disaster or chance, somehow manages to transform itself, almost immediately, into a civilised social unit. No matter how far from home Frenchmen may find themselves, or how adverse the circumstances, they soon rise above purely materialistic preoccupations, and breach the gulf between the primitive conditions of cave-dwellers and the complex life of the city-dwellers. Their behaviour is not as normal as one might expect; in fact various nationalities react differently in similar circumstances. But the life and civilisation of the city has left such a strong mark on the French that when they find themselves in primitive conditions they do not develop into clans, or tribes, or companies and

regiments, but instinctively and unconsciously gravitate towards the complex social scheme of the city. The city is their natural organic unity, and like the emigrants of ancient times, they model themselves on the pattern of the city. Not only do they build up a complex social structure, but they infuse it with the living soul of their native country.

The Russians were amazed by our ingenuity and initiative. First of all, thanks to Fauvelle's and Grandidier's culinary invention, French cooking flourished again, though modestly. Eating became more than a mere necessity. After all, it was one aspect of civilised life and, in our circumstances, an aspect that could not be despised. Then we took up handicrafts and formed guilds. The past triumphs of craftsmanship were revived, thanks to French talent. With an axe, a plane, a beam or two and a few planks, Michel built tables with spindle legs, and book-cases which looked quite civilised. A cobbler's workshop was also set up, and then a corporation known as 'France at work' founded. It was a great day for us when Lemoine, a country policeman from Languedoc, read us the following proclamation:

"Citizens! This is 'France at work' calling. It is only through work, and work well done, that we can hope to raise the standard of living among the Mitchurinians, and make their life comfortable. 'France at work' is anxious to maintain the traditions of our forefathers. At the cheapest possible prices we can provide you with sandals, bowls, cigarette-holders, pipes and so forth. All orders should be sent to Room 3."

Sure enough Bassot, Lemoine, Castaigne, Sauzeau, Aumont and others had set up a carpenter's shop in Room 3. The Soviet authorities had distributed a few roubles amongst us. The workshop of 'France at work' was so successful that within a few days the five or six

craftsmen had pocketed our money, down to the last kopek. Capitalism sprang up in the land of Socialism!

Fleury and Boutoul both devoted themselves, with the utmost fervour, to the good of the community. One day they would tattoo you in three colours; the next day they would be up before dawn making shrubberies and flower beds round the pavilion. Whatever they did, whether they made playing-cards, cherrywood pipes, or under-clothing, they worked away diligently and silently. Our basket-balls kept getting lost or punctured. Fleury and Boutoul made a string net, 60 yards long and 2 yards high, with which they surrounded the playing field. Although they knew that our stay in Mitchurin was quite temporary, they were never put off their undertakings. On the eve of our departure they had just completed their own house. With mud and a hand-made pounder they made several hundred bricks. Their little house was finished, the walls were covered with plaster, the fireplace functioned properly, and the window had hinged shutters. Boutoul and Fleury had built themselves a table, a cupboard, chairs, hammocks, and made their own chessmen and chessboard. Robinson Crusoe would have felt quite an amateur if he had landed at Mitchurin.

Even before the snow had melted, we had formed a recreation circle, just as in the early days of the Oflag.

The Russians could only provide us with two distractions: the Kolkhosian cinema and shower-baths. The cinema shows were given in our pink Trianon. We walked in single file, climbed over the wall which surrounded our domain and, after wading through mud or snow, according to the time of the year, we entered the cinema. The walls were decorated with mural paintings glorifying the Soviet Infantry, Air Force and Tank Force. Above the screen there was a large inscription, in red and green

lettering, which welcomed the audience in the name of the Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin Party.

There, we could see the same recent Soviet films which were shown to millions of Russian workers and peasants: *Suvarov*, *Sabotage in the Mine*, *Kronstadt* or *The Party Card*.

The outing to the shower-baths also meant a short walk. At the end of the park, beside a pond which was frozen in winter and stagnant in summer, was an 'isba' which served as our bathroom. In the one communal room each man was given a wooden bucket which he filled with warm water, and we would all start soaping ourselves. Now and again a washerwoman would appear, some heavy peasant whose son might one day become a member of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. "Well, Barichna!" Boisson would call out to her as he emptied his pail of warm water over his head, and the woman would burst out laughing.

Our range of amusements was rather limited, but before long we had extended it. Naturally our achievements at Mitchurin were minute when compared with those at the Oflag, but then, our conditions were so different and our talents more restricted. When I look back on this period at Mitchurin, I feel an immense humility and an immense tenderness. We had afternoon courses and evening lectures. A library was set up, with librarians and bookbinders. We had chess championships with forty-eight competitors. (Who can say that the French are not mathematical?) There were also billiards, volley-ball, basketball, dominoes, bowls, and draughts championships. We were extraordinarily keen on games and sports. As soon as the snow had melted there was a basket-ball or volley-ball match, and eight teams would compete for the glorious title of the Mitchurin Championship. We rigged up a ring for boxing matches, and a stage for theatricals. Richer and Sylclair produced a choir. We even had our

art gallery. It had a great and almost legitimate success, because even if we were not at Mitchurin long enough to create a Mitchurin literature and style, Camille Orcière's wood sculptures (notably his 'Zafra, Allegory of Hope') were quite worthy of exhibition in any Soviet Popular Art Museum.

There was also a 'Spoken News Flash'. Every day, our faithful interpreter, Lhomme, surrounded by his team of editors and scribes, translated the communiqués which Castaigne would read aloud to us at lunch-time.

What was really remarkable was not so much our material achievements, but rather the fact that this little group of a hundred or a hundred and fifty Frenchmen, of every class and opinion, should have formed a miniature France in the depths of the Russian forest.

A hundred or a hundred and fifty Frenchmen who were free to express their opinions openly was more than enough to create a 'public opinion'. The vicissitudes of our Forum, and the evolution of our doctrines and forms of Government in our 'Mitchurin State', would provide ample material for another book. Some people deplore the fact that man is a political animal, but I am certain that public opinion does count, and that in spite of the errors and differences of opinion which were caused by party spirit and our seclusion from the world, our little group represented the most sincere and passionate aspects of French public opinion. In Germany, we had come across prisoners who were indifferent to politics, but at Mitchurin no one was indifferent, except for two or three men who must have escaped by mistake. Our one great obsession was France, and the liberation of France. Mitchurin was not just an internment camp. For about six months it became a little French colony, certain of its right and its authority to speak for France.

Although it might seem ridiculous, this minute colony

of Frenchmen tried to treat with Russia as one Power treats with another, and it was successful on several occasions. Why did we write those daily letters to Stalin, Molotov, Vorochilov and Timochenko? And why should we have been contemplating escape just when our conditions were improving? It was because we felt that we had our mission as Frenchmen to accomplish. It was also because we reacted as true Frenchmen, that most of us could not bring ourselves to believe that the men of Vichy had become the accomplices of German National Socialism. Up to June 1941, and even later, half the prisoners at Mitchurin lived on an optimistic interpretation of the events of December 13th 1940—an interpretation put out by the Prisoners' Commissariat in Vichy, which Bossieu and his friends had heard in their Camp in Germany.

Even the most ardent de Gaullists refused to believe in the Vichy betrayal. Their eyes were only opened by the heart-rending Syrian campaign. This caused a tremendous outburst of fury. We all knew that de Gaulle had saved France's honour, but we were not all of us convinced that he was the *only* man who was *really* continuing the struggle, and who had the right to speak for France and for the prisoners in Germany. Suddenly, a passionate wave of patriotic fervour swept over Mitchurin. All the rooms were draped with French flags, which we made from dyed towels, and which bore the motto 'Honneur et Patrie' and the arms of the French Republic. Mittelle painted the 'Marseillaise', by Rude, on the refectory wall. Boutoul and Fleury laid out three coloured flower-beds in the park, one representing the French Flag and the Gallic Cock, the second the Union Jack and the British Lion, and the third, which had the place of honour, the Cross of Lorraine. Our patriotism was unbelievably exuberant. Déroulède was on the point of becoming a great poet.



It was at this time that we formed ourselves into the 'Billotte Detachment' and became a solid block of passionate patriots, burning to throw ourselves heart and soul into action, and to perform the wildest feats of heroism. No wonder our exuberance and lyricism appalled the London bureaucrats when we landed in England.

It was also about this time that the song, *Pour Combattre Avec de Gaulle* was composed. Here are the words:

*Tune: Marching song of the Bataillonsaires.*

#### CHORUS

Pour combattre avec de Gaulle,  
Souviens-toi, souviens-toi,  
Qu'il faut s'taper pas mal de tôles  
En veut-tu? en voilà.  
De Kaunas à Mitchourine  
Au grand pays de Staline,  
Evadés dans la misère,  
Toujours la mine altière.

#### 1

Lorsqu'on a franchi la frontière,  
Les uns, les autres, on avait cru  
Retrouver enfin la lumière  
Et tout ce qu'on avait perdu.  
Ne nous cassons pas la nénette  
Si nous sommes encore internés.  
Qu'est-ce ça fout?  
On s'en fout.

#### 2

On voulait manger des côtelettes  
Et boir un coup de Beaujolais;  
On aurait aimé des fillettes:

Depuis le temps qu'on on rêvait. . . .  
Ne nous cassons pas la nénette  
Si nous sommes encore internés,  
Qu'est-ce ça fout?  
On s'en fout.

## 3

On crève d'envie de bouffer du boche  
Assaisonné de macaroni.  
On voudrait casser la caboche  
A Hitler et Mussolini.  
Ne nous cassons pas la nénette  
Si nous sommes encore internés,  
Qu'est-ce ça fout?  
On s'en fout.

## 4

Mais comme on n'est pas des bourriques,  
Pour sûr qu'un jour on s'en tirera!  
Grâce à nos amis britanniques,  
Vers l'Angleterre, on les mettra.  
Ne nous cassons pas la nénette  
Si nous sommes encore internés.  
Qu'est-ce ça fout?  
On s'en fout!

## 5

Ceux qui reverront notre France,  
Si douce et tellement aimée,  
Diront qu'on a tous eu confiance  
En sa glorieuse destinée.  
Ils ne se casseront plus la nénette  
Ils pourront vivre en liberté,  
Plus de barbelés,  
En liberté.

## CHORUS

Pour combattre avec de Gaulle,  
 Souviens-toi, souviens-toi,  
 Qu'il faut s'taper pas mal de têtes  
 En veut-tu? en voilà.  
 De Kaunas à Mitchourine,  
 Au grand pays de Staline,  
 Evadés dans la misère,  
 Toujours la mine altière.\*

## CHORUS

\*To fight under de Gaulle  
 Remember, remember,  
 You've got to take many a knock.  
 Are you prepared to? Well here you are!  
 From Kaunas to Mitchurin,  
 To Stalin's great country  
 We escaped in wretchedness  
 But we were ever proud.

## 1

When we crossed the frontier  
 We all expected  
 To find the light again  
 And all that we had lost.  
 Don't let's despair  
 If we're still interned.  
 What does it matter?  
 We don't care!

## 2

We wanted to eat cutlets  
 And drink Beaujolais.  
 We'd have loved the girls  
 Whom we'd dreamt of so much. . . .  
 Don't let's despair  
 If we're still interned  
 What does it matter?  
 We don't care!

## 3

We long to taste the Hun  
 Seasoned with macaroni.  
 We'd like to break the skull  
 Of Hitler and Mussolini.  
 Don't let's despair  
 If we're still interned  
 What does it matter?  
 We don't care!

## VIII

## FREEDOM

SUNDAY June 22nd was a rainy day. A storm which had broken out in the morning had soaked the field where we played basket-ball and the gymkhana which had been fixed for the afternoon had to be cancelled. Even for professional idlers—prisoners—nothing is drearier than a blank Sunday. The drama that was being enacted in Syria only helped to make this anniversary of one of the worst dates of 1940 the more heart-rending. We were alternately furious and disgusted: each man was sitting

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4  
But as we're not fools  
We'll get there some day  
Thanks to our British friends  
We'll go to England.  
Don't let's despair  
If we're still interned.  
What does it matter?  
We don't care!

5  
Those who'll see France again  
So gentle and so dear,  
Will say that we were confident  
In her glorious destiny.  
They'll no longer despair  
They'll be able to live in freedom  
With no barbed wire  
In freedom.

## CHORUS

To fight under de Gaulle  
Remember, remember,  
You've got to take many a knock.  
Are you prepared to? Well here you are!  
From Kaunas to Mitchurin,  
To Stalin's great country  
We escaped in wretchedness  
But we were ever proud.

sullenly in a corner, the games of chess dragged on monotonously, and the volumes of Karl Marx, which no one any longer had the courage to read, were lying on the table under a layer of dust.

Suddenly, towards two o'clock, our interpreter (for Moscow had officially appointed us an interpreter) came to the gate and asked to speak to Captain Billotte without delay. Billotte received him in the games room where Merlot and Taxil were playing billiards all by themselves. The interpreter looked ill: he was pale and swallowed several times before uttering in a guttural and shaky voice:

"An important communication. . . . Since this morning our country is at war with Germany. The brigands have attacked our frontier; they have bombed Kronstadt, Kaunas, Kiev and Sebastopol. . . . There have been many killed."

The four Frenchmen who were present looked at one another in complete silence. Knowing the preparations which had been made in Germany since the first rumours of German-Russian tension had spread in August 1940, we never doubted that Hitler would attack the U.S.S.R. one day. (In fact we even told the Russians this on twenty occasions, and on his arrival in Lithuania in February 1941, Captain Billotte had even written a memorandum to this effect and sent it to the Soviet High Command.) But nothing, absolutely nothing—except perhaps a confused anxiety which revealed itself in the faces and in the words of our sentries during the last three days—had caused us to suspect that the hour of German aggression had come. The wireless had not hinted at any international complication: at most it had denied, only eight days ago, the rumour that there were troop concentrations on the frontier. Up to the last minute postal communications had been absolutely normal, both for incoming and outgoing mail. Moreover, on that selfsame

morning of June 22nd, neither *Pravda* nor *Investia* had made the slightest reference to any possible tension, nor revealed any anxiety or suspicions of the imminent cataclysm. . . .

A general meeting of the escaped prisoners was immediately called and we foregathered in the games room. The interpreter came and stood behind a desk covered with a red cloth, with Captain Billotte on his right and a Soviet Army Captain on his left. Behind them on the wall was a large map of the world, where another great blood-red splash of colour bore the inscription:

*U.S.S.R...ONE-SIXTH OF THE SURFACE  
OF THE GLOBE*

On the opposite side a large picture of Lenin, with a sardonic expression, dominated the whole scene.

"Captain Billotte is going to address you," said the Chairman, articulating his words with great difficulty.

In the over-crowded room there was such deep silence that all one could hear was the paper curtains rustling in the wet wind. The Frenchmen's 'Starschi' then began to address the gathering. As soon as he had announced the news there was a general uproar. This day, June 22nd 1941, the day when our gymkhana had had to be cancelled, was for us the turning-point of the war and the prelude to our freedom. Captain de Person could not control his desire to express his loving sympathy and ran forward to shake the interpreter by both hands. "Sir," he said, "we are glad, we are really glad."

Captain Billotte then continued his address. With the same vigour and optimism with which a French ambassador would have communicated to Stalin a message of sympathy from the Republican government, he begged our interpreter to convey to the 'natchalnik' of the camp

the French prisoners' indignation at Germany's act of aggression. He also expressed his firm conviction that the Allied Forces would end, sooner or later—probably sooner now that Russia was at war—by crushing Germany. He had often spoken on these lines in front of Red Army officers, but they had always maintained a polite reserve, mingled with scepticism, due no doubt to the fact that they were anxious to preserve their neutrality, and also because deep down they were obsessed by a secret respect for the strength of the Germans. But now—on June 22nd 1941—how the situation had changed! . . . A Soviet officer and a Soviet official, weighed down by the seriousness of the present events, were thanking the prisoners of France for their words of reassurance in Russian victory. . . .

And yet, were we really certain of the invincibility of the Soviet Army? Some of us refused to question its invincibility. As I was walking downstairs to roll-call on that very evening of the 22nd, my companion said to me: "I can't believe that the Red Army could be defeated. If it were, I don't know what I'd do. . . . I'd blow out my brains." Others, the majority of us, had spotted a certain passivity, a fear of the unexpected and a kind of naïve vanity among the Red soldiers, and were consequently a little uneasy. Above all, since escape, an individual act of revenge, had not freed us from a sense of inferiority before the German military strength, some of us found it difficult to believe that Hitler would have risked the future of his country blindly. "He must have a nerve to attack the 'Poruskis' while he still has England to cope with!" said some admiringly. However, there was nothing to prove that the deliberate invasion of the U.S.S.R. was a sign of Germany's invincible strength. It was certainly a proof, above all, of Hitler's confidence in himself, if this was intended to be the final manoeuvre

in his long established plan for world domination. On the other hand, Hitler might have made this move only because the 'blitz' on England had failed, or because he was convinced that the U.S.S.R. would attack Germany sooner or later, in which case it was merely a daring expedient to forestall Russia's attack.

The continuous shifting of the full weight of the German attack from one front to the other, which during the first phase of the war had brought about the successive defeats of Poland and France, had led to the main offensive being now concentrated on the eastern frontier, and Russia had to be beaten so that Hitler, having acquired all the resources of the continent, might turn again on the Anglo-Saxons for whom there would then be no hope. But did the logic of war imply that this see-saw motion would again prove successful? Surely, if the U.S.S.R. held firm where Poland had succumbed, and if this bold strategy borrowed from Frederick the Great proved too audacious, then Hitler would be caught in his own trap. What most of us thought was that even if the Red Army were beaten, it would not be more beaten than the Army of the Tsar in 1812, and the taking of Moscow had not saved Napoleon! In order to destroy, or only to neutralise Russia as a military power, it would be necessary to overthrow the Régime, and many of us had been able to see for ourselves (perhaps the very irony of our position as prisoners in the N.K.V.O. prisons had driven it home) that the Soviet Régime was strong, enjoyed the support of the masses, and that the Russian people felt they were participating in a great work of emancipation.

Moreover, they knew that the weaknesses which the Western Powers had pointed out in Soviet morale had been due to faults which had now been smoothed out; that the principle of the 'Kolkhose' was far more solid and acceptable to the people than we had been led to



believe; and that in spite of Goebbels's propaganda, the separatist tendencies would make way, in the face of a common danger, for a broader patriotism based on a community of effort. Finally, our little group of Frenchmen isolated in the Russian forest between a Kolkhosian settlement and a disused monastery, guessed that if Stalin could only rekindle the flame which had animated the sailors of Kronstadt and the defenders of Tsaritsin twenty years ago, he would have the unanimous support of the united peoples of the Socialist Republics.

Meanwhile, we knew that on the Russian border there were other Frenchmen for whom these hours were a nightmare. About fifty escaped prisoners were still in the prison of Kaunas, waiting for their transfer to Mitchurin. Would they be evacuated? What would happen to them? Kaunas, an advanced outpost of the Soviet Union, fell within forty-eight hours. Then the fighting swept onwards into Russia, and there were battles being fought quite near us. Still no news of the Frenchmen at Kaunas. It was only two months later that we learnt what had become of them.

On Sunday June 22nd, while we were kicking our heels at Mitchurin, they were still in the central prison of Kaunas waiting for their examination and identification to be completed. For the last few days they had been feeling vaguely uneasy. During the past two nights they had heard columns of tanks passing through the main street; on Thursday, June 18th, some Lithuanians in a near-by cell had sent the following message in Morse to Company Sergeant Major Carpy, who held the highest rank among the group of prisoners in the Kaunas prison: "Frenchmen, next week you will be at our side in the streets of Kaunas!" Carpy never dreamt for a moment that this news was at all probable. Suddenly, on Sunday 22nd, at 5.30 a.m., there was the noise of dive-bombers

whistling overhead, explosions and buildings crumbling: the German air force was bombing Kaunas, and every four hours there were new waves of dive-bombers.

Imagine the anxiety of the prisoners on that terrible day! On Sunday evening the wardens disappeared without giving the prisoners their meal. That night no one went to bed; and the prisoners remained fully dressed. They spent the night pacing up and down in their cells and smoking their last stocks of cigarettes. On Monday June 23rd the doors of the prison were thrown open and the prisoners were free.

At that moment a voice, a French voice, rang out in the corridors: "Escaped prisoners must assemble in Room 18!" In the deserted prison forty-six Frenchmen held a council: the decision which these Frenchmen took, unanimously, was to risk all rather than fall into German hands. If it is true that one man who remained behind in Kaunas, and was recaptured by the Germans, consented to become the instrument of foul propaganda in exchange for his freedom, there were forty-five other Frenchmen who were able to show what they and their two million comrades imprisoned in Germany were ready to risk in order to escape their oppressors.

As soon as these men, who had sworn to stick together, reached the main road they were confronted with the sight of retreating machine-gun lorries riddled with bullets and covered in blood. News spread that "the Germans were only two hours away from the outskirts of the town". The bombing started again. The Frenchmen marched through the town amidst the crowds who showered gifts and provisions upon them. They presented themselves in formation before the Military Authorities: No orders. They went to the Town Hall: No orders. Then to the Police Station: No orders. They

would have to act independently. They went to the railway station, where a refugee train was about to leave. It was the last one, and they got into it. Then while the Russian troops were disputing Lithuanian soil with the Germans, the Frenchmen took part in a heartrending exodus such as had been the fate of so many French towns only a year ago.

They were crossing the Baltic countries under German bombardment. All the civilian convoys were subjected to low-level bombing and machine-gunning by German planes. Their train was cut in two; eight carriages were set on fire and burnt like torches. In this crisis these French peasants and workers did not forget that they were soldiers: they set an example of courage, organised first-aid parties, picked up the dead, helped to carry the wounded, and finally went back into the burning train to save what they could from the flames.

When they counted their numbers after this episode, they found that two men were missing: one had been wounded and the other had probably been killed; they were never seen again. They had to continue their journey in spite of everything, and they managed to find another train. Again they were bombed and machine-gunned, but they struggled on. Then began an amazing roundabout journey, which took them to Riga, then from Riga to Moscow, and from Moscow to Tula, where they stayed in the station for ten days and shared the remainder of their Kaunas provisions with the Red Army soldiers who were in charge of them. Finally, in August, they went from Tula to Vologda, where they joined our main body. Later every one of them asked to serve under de Gaulle.

Now that Russia was fighting side by side with Great Britain there was no longer anything to prevent us from

joining the Free French forces. We were quick to realise this clearly, and immediately pointed it out to the Russians. On June 22nd we drew up a letter in which we sent a collective message of sympathy to Stalin. On the following day we sent off four letters, addressed to Stalin, Molotov, Vorochilov and Timochenko, reminding them of our repeated requests to be allowed to fight with de Gaulle. Then we grew more and more feverishly excited with every hour that passed: the slightest delay seemed intolerable. Moreover, in spite of the fact that we were not well informed, we had foreseen the lightning rapidity with which the Germans would advance on Minsk and Smolensk. We began to wonder what we should do if, while the German panzers were drawing steadily nearer, the Soviet Authorities still refused to arrange for our evacuation.

On the morning of June 26th, Captain Billotte arranged a 'staff meeting' of the camp. It was decided that in the event of imminent danger, we should evacuate Mitchurin and endeavour to reach Moscow on our own initiative. We divided ourselves up into five sections and a provisional plan of campaign was drawn up. Fortunately we possessed a few maps, which were distributed among the sections, and an itinerary was chosen. Then we proceeded to make an inventory of the provisions at our disposal. That very night, the 'natchalnik' of the camp received orders from Moscow to arrange for our evacuation from Mitchurin. . . .

We left Mitchurin on Sunday, June 29th. At Kozielsk station we had to part from George Briggs, the warrant officer, and our thirteen other British comrades, who were taken in the direction of Moscow. As for us, we did not know what our destination might be.

Installed in our goods train, with a barrel of water and a barrel of salted fish per carriage, we all felt extremely

cheerful. Everyone was in high spirits. In the 'G.H.Q.' van the cavalry officers were conversing with the same animation as they had displayed in the days of their famous cooking parties. Captain de Person was singing 'La Boiteuse' at the top of his voice; Lieutenant Bozel peered through the little window and addressed warm greetings to the sentries: it was all very gay. At Soukhinitchin, the onlookers recognised that we were French and came running along the railway lines to offer us cigarettes. At Borodino, the Russian in charge of our convoy, fearing that the crowds would fraternise with his prisoners, hit upon the idea of pretending that we were German prisoners, but this brain-wave of his almost caused us to be stoned. . . .

And so we travelled through the Moscow region, where every place-name now evokes the memory of a hecatomb. Enormous military trains kept passing us on their way to the Ukrainian front. Their brand-new vans, each weighing 50 or 70 tons and fitted with automatic couplings, were loaded with bren-carriers, light machine-gun tanks, field-guns, magnificent light-armoured material, and impeccable troops, erect and silent, in this grave and tragic hour of Russia's trial during the first weeks of the invasion. We journeyed up to Moscow, crossed the great railway bridge over the Moscowa, south of the Kremlin, saw the golden domes of Saint Vladimir sparkling in the summer sunshine, and passed through the new suburbs which form a gigantic belt of factories round the town; then we left the capital again and passed the huge suburbs of the North, which stretch out for twenty miles or so. Then we travelled through vast forests and marshes, crossed the wide Volga, and went through an enormous marshalling yard, as capacious and as modern as any in Europe, at Iaroslavl, formerly a holy city. Then forests again, and somewhere in the North, roughly at the point where the

Trans-Siberian railway branches off on the Archangel line, we came to Grazievitch, our new camp.

In vain we had tried to get back to war; now it was the war itself which was overtaking us like a tidal wave and drawing us back into its orbit for good. On the day following our arrival we learnt from our sentries that Stalin had made a speech. For the last ten days Russia had been impatiently awaiting his words. His prolonged silence, which if it was premeditated was an astute calculation on his part, had become intolerable, even to us. The fact that he had spoken at last lifted a great burden from our shoulders. All day long, on July 4th, wireless-sets were broadcasting his speech. Finally on July 5th or 6th, *Pravda* published the text. We pooled all our smatterings of Russian and, under the guidance of our improvised interpreter, Jacques Lhomme, we began to translate the first sentences and wrote them down in the little notebooks we had brought with us from Mitchurin.

"The German armies have succeeded in taking Lithuania, a great proportion of Latvia, the western half of White Russia and a part of west Ukraine. A grave danger threatens our country. . . ."

This news was immediately followed by a commentary, which explained how the reverses of the first week of the war were due to the brutality and treachery of German aggression, and then justified Russia's policy of 1939.

"Some may wonder how it was that we concluded a Pact of non-aggression with such scoundrels and brigands as Hitler and Ribbentrop. . . . We have assured our country eighteen months of peace and given it the chance to prepare its forces to meet the danger which has resulted from the violation of this Pact. . . ."

When we had got to this point of the speech we decided to translate it in full. It took us three hours. Stalin went on to explain to his people, shortly and simply, with extra-

ordinary vigour, why the war was being fought and exactly what was at stake. He presented them with a sort of introduction to national warfare, which was as revealing of the psychology of the people to whom it was addressed as of his own psychology. The real entry into war of millions of Soviet citizens, or at any rate their grasp of the situation, dates not from June 22nd, but from the speech of July 4th.

"It is above all necessary," Stalin proclaimed, "that our people, the Soviet citizens, should understand the seriousness of the danger menacing our country, and that they should abandon the placid and care-free mentality of the days of peaceful reconstruction. . . . What was understandable before the war would be fatal to-day. . . ."

"Our enemy is cruel and merciless. He wishes to gain possession of the land we have loved, to gain possession of our wheat and our petrol, the fruits of our work. He wants to restore Tsarism, and destroy the national civilisations and states of the Russians, the Ukrainians, White Russians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Esthonians, Moldaves, Uzbecks, Tartars, Georgians, Armenians, the Azerbaidj and the other free peoples of the Soviet Union. He wants to germanise them and turn them into the slaves of German princes and barons. Therefore it is now a matter of life and death for the Soviet State, and for the peoples of the U.S.S.R., to know whether the peoples of the Soviet Union are to be free or whether they are to become slaves. Soviet citizens must realise this and abandon their carelessness. . . ."

Then on a note of ferocious resolution, Stalin dictated his orders to the nation at war:

"The peoples of the Soviet Union must rise up to defend their rights and their land against the enemy. We must organise help for the Red Army in every domain, and concentrate our efforts on increasing its resources and on

meeting its requirements. We must organise the rapid transport of troops, food supplies and munitions . . . we must strengthen our rear, subordinate our work to the needs of the Army, see that every undertaking is properly carried out, produce more guns, more machine-guns, cannon, ammunition, more shells and planes, organise guards for factories, electrical plants, telephone and telegraph lines, and prepare effective anti-air-raid precautions in every locality.

"In the event of retreat, all rolling stock must be evacuated; we must not let a single engine fall into the enemy's hands, nor a single van. The enemy must not lay hands on a single pound of flour, nor a single can of petrol. Collective farmers must evacuate all their cattle and turn over their harvests to organisations which will be in charge of dispatching them to the interior. All valuable commodities, including non-ferrous metals, grain, and fuel, which cannot be evacuated must be resolutely destroyed.

"In regions occupied by the enemy, guerilla detachments on foot and on horseback must be organised, as well as groups of saboteurs who will fight enemy units and organise guerilla warfare, mine bridges and roads, destroy telephone lines, set fire to forests, houses and trains, and make life impossible for the enemy and his accomplices."

The end of the speech was an act of faith in victory. After paying homage to Soviet virtue and courage, Stalin praised the fraternity of the peoples united against tyranny. Then came a last appeal for a mass rising. Finally, like a postscript, came the announcement of the creation of a committee for National Defence, which had already been given full powers and which was to be the dictatorship of the proletariat: "The Committee for National Defence calls upon the entire people to organise themselves round the party of Lenin and Stalin and the



Government, in order to support the Red Army and the Red Fleet, and help in the annihilation of the enemy."

When the translation had been completed, a voice called out: "Communiqué, communiqué!" and the speech was read out to the whole group of escaped prisoners. After this, we no longer had the slightest doubt that Russia would never capitulate. "We shall never surrender!" Churchill had affirmed thirteen months earlier, in a speech which will go down as one of the most sublime pages in the history of England. Stalin's words expressed the same resolution. Even if Moscow were taken, even if Leningrad were taken, or Stalingrad, or Tiflis, Hitler would not conquer. All that he needed to say to the citizens of the U.S.S.R., in order to arouse them to war and to stir up their indignation, to fill them with confidence, resolution and hope—all that Stalin said, and now he could shut himself up for months in silence. But we knew that the defender of the Tsaritzine was on the watch: we could already foresee, just as the Soviet people foresaw it, the heroic defence of Moscow, Stalingrad and Leningrad. . . .

Meanwhile the Germans were advancing steadily. We became more and more uneasy, since the newspapers never published any maps, and the young interpreter, Eugénie, who had been attached to us by the central Administration, was extraordinarily reserved. Every evening, just before sunset, she would walk into our barbed-wire enclosure. Our noisy and ragged crowd would gather round to hear her read a translation of the latest news broadcast from Moscow. Sometimes she would answer our questions, but on the whole we were very rarely any the wiser for her visits. On July 22nd, when she had finished reading, her eyes were filled with tears: that is how we knew that the Germans had reached the walls of Smolensk.

A week later we were woken in the middle of the night

by the sound of hymn-singing: the Polish prisoners interned in the neighbourhood were celebrating, in their own fashion, the Stalin-Sikorski pacts which would lead to the rebirth of Poland. From now on Russian sentries had to salute Polish officers.

At about this time there was a new event in our lives. On the evening of August 6th, Captain Billotte was told that he was to proceed to Moscow that same night in order to discuss plans for our departure with General Mason MacFarlane, the head of the British Military Mission in the U.S.S.R. This news spread like wild-fire. We were delirious with excitement, and probably none of us had ever before been quite so wild with joy. We all pressed round Captain Billotte while he was being shaved, to feast our eyes on this man in whom all our hopes were centred. We all clubbed together to provide him with a uniform worthy of his mission. One man produced a miraculously neat pair of breeches, another a new tie. In no time we had got together a complete officer's uniform. Mittelle and Pillon hastily embroidered the emblem of the Tank Corps on a Basque beret; then, by some extraordinary luck, Sauzeau produced from the bottom of his kit-bag, which had accompanied him all the way from Bordeaux, some authentic gold braid.

When a Russian officer came in the middle of the night to fetch Captain Billotte he could hardly recognise this impeccable young French officer transformed through our enthusiasm. Everyone had got up to salute 'their captain', and crowded round him in the pale northern night, to assist at this great moment in their history. With exalted patriotism due to the extraordinary misfortunes they had gone through, they sang the 'Marseillaise'.

After this we became wildly impatient. Every day that passed seemed interminably long. We gave up trying to stave off boredom, and chess became hateful. We did

nothing but bet on the exact date when we should see General de Gaulle for the first time. Some of us were reduced to plucking off daisy petals: "Zaftra, skoro, otchem, skoro, bistrè!—to-morrow, soon, very soon, always!" . . . "You are going to make a wonderful journey!" said all our oracles; but would we travel via Siberia and America, or via Archangel and the North Sea, or would we make a journey through the land of the Thousand and One Nights, Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan? . . .

On August 21st, Captain Billotte reappeared again for forty-eight hours. Besides the promise of early departure by a route which was still a secret, he brought back from Moscow an extraordinary mixture of news of the war and of civilisation, even of unbelievable luxury. . . . Yes, the Germans were advancing, they had reached Viasma. Tank battles of incredible violence were being fought, and every night incendiary bombs were pouring down on the wooden houses of Moscow; on the walls of the Kremlin there were huge camouflage constructions in imitation of trees and *isbas*. The U.S.S.R. had to hold out with its Regular Army and the eighteen mobilised classes of European Russia until the coming of winter, when Stalin would be able to throw his reserve of eight million ski troops into the battle and drive the enemy back from Moscow. Meanwhile, white bread was not rationed in Moscow; the bath-rooms in the Metropole Hotel were all working; *Figaro* was being produced at the Opera House, and at a dinner party in the Afghanistan Legation (or perhaps it was the Yugoslav Legation) diplomats had made toasts in French and had drunk champagne to the downfall of Hitler.

After that, because Captain Billotte had eaten white bread and heard an opera by Mozart, we somehow felt that he couldn't help looking upon us as though we were

creatures from another world, a world he had almost forgotten. At the same time we felt that we had been cut off from the past, Germany, the camps, the Russian plains, Kaunas, Lubianka, Mitchurin, and those millions of women who had swept the snow from the railway lines, stood in water to dig new canals, helped to build another railway line to Archangel, and who were now preparing to dig trenches for the defenders of Moscow. Our adventures were drawing to their close. Even Billotte's account of his meeting with a Frenchman who had recently arrived from France did not surprise us as much as it would have a month earlier or a month later. In a street in Moscow, a stranger seeing him in his French uniform had stopped him and had wept: it was Jean-Richard Bloch, who had made a miraculous escape from France through Germany only a few weeks ago. . . . But the adventure which was still to come was the discovery of the French Resistance Movement.

At dawn on August 30th 1941, our last day in Russia, we stood on the quayside at Archangel, lined up in threes. Then, as though the last moment needed to be marked by a symbolical gesture, Deschamps walked along the file and gave each of the 186 men a cigarette. God alone knows where these cigarettes came from or how Deschamps had managed to keep them until this moment, or rather, for this moment. How we enjoyed that last cigarette in Russia, which we smoked while we were about to become **FREE FRENCHMEN** again! We inhaled each puff with delight, and between each puff we filled our nostrils with the breath of freedom.

## IX

## THE END OF THE JOURNEY

*(To the men of Force III)*

SOMEWHERE in the White Sea a Russian cargo boat was steaming through the mist behind two mine-sweepers. The boat was bearing its cargo of escaped prisoners towards their destination. The sea was very calm. Now and again we could make out the outline of a warship, and then it would be lost again in the mist. The line of the Russian coast behind us had already disappeared. The 186 of us were standing on the deck and all looking straight ahead. Suddenly, as though it were a magnet which had mysteriously drawn us towards it, a gigantic shape rose up through the mist, only about 200 feet away. "What's her flag? Who can see her flag?" we all asked excitedly. Captain de Person, who always rises to the occasion, promised a bottle of champagne to the first man who could spot the Union Jack. "It's the British flag!" shouted several voices. . . .

And so it was! This was the ship which had been waiting for us. We approached it slowly. At first we were so overcome that we remained silent. We could hardly believe our eyes. So this enormous liner was really there, waiting for us, waiting on purpose for us alone! Then we burst into wild cheers, which were echoed by the hundreds of British officers and men who were leaning over the railings on all the four decks. There was an unbelievable outburst of shouting, dancing, embracing, and tears of joy welled up in our eyes. Then in the middle of this sea, lost on the edge of the inhabited world, we began to sing 'La Marseillaise' more solemnly than ever before. The old

words took on a new meaning: 'Allons, enfants de la Patrie'. . . . Yes, we were ready to take up arms for mutilated France. 'Le jour de gloire est arrivé'. . . . For us it was perhaps not a day of glory, but what a day of joy! What a dawn of liberation! 'L'étendard sanglant est levé'. . . . We had seen that blood-stained flag flying over our towns, our houses and the camps where two million of us were reduced to slavery. The two Russian colonels who were with us stood to attention while we sang, and all the men on the British ship took up the chorus: "Aux armes, citoyens! Formez vos bataillons. . . ."

On August 30th 1941 we felt as young as the young Marsillaise.

Now we were drawing alongside the British ship amid new outbursts of wild cheering, and from all the decks handfuls of cigarettes were showered down upon us like confetti. When the two ships had drawn up side by side, each man wanted to be the first to touch the enormous hull of the British ship. Deschamps was the first to do so. I was standing beside him, and I saw him stretch out his hand and touch the ship with utmost fervour. Then a gangway was thrown between the two ships. The deck of the Russian cargo-boat was just on a level with the port. We passed over the gangway one by one. A Russian colonel ticked off our names on a typewritten list as we filed past him, and at the other end a British Colonel and Captain Billotte stood ready to welcome us.

Cheers for England! We were now the guests of His Majesty, on His Majesty's liner the *Empress of Canada*.

"Seigneur, c'est trop, vraiment je n'ose. . . ." ("O Lord, it is too much, I do not dare. . . .") Whenever I look back on those first minutes I am always reminded of this line from 'Sagesse', by Verlaine. We were returning from our journey to the end of the night, where we had been stripped of everything, sometimes of hope itself.

We hadn't slept in a bed or eaten with a fork for almost two years. We had endured defeat and slavery. We had undergone every imaginable hardship and disappointment. We had been pariahs so beneath contempt that we were not even honoured with hatred. Having our hair shaved off every fortnight and eating out of bowls had become a matter of course. In fact we had grown so unaccustomed to civilised habits that to go to the latrine without an escort, or to wear ordinary clothes again after our *mujik* costumes, seemed an honour. Sleeping out in the open, and eating raw potatoes during our escape, were things we had taken for granted. For us 'space' had been only a word, 'liberty' a dream, and 'civilisation' a myth, for so long.

Now as we were returning to fight side by side with the Fighting Frenchmen, now as we were walking back into the world of the living through this narrow gangway, freedom suddenly appeared before us in the shape of the saloon of a liner, with dark wooden panelling like that of an English dining-room and long polished corridors leading off on all sides. Although this liner had been converted into a troop-carrier, it still retained its brass and its gilt, its large and small drawing-rooms, its dining-rooms with stewards in white jackets, its elaborate staircases and its lift. For the first few minutes we were struck dumb with amazement, like the intruder who has pushed open a back door and suddenly finds himself on the bright stage of the Opera House with an opera in full swing, and is so surprised that he is not even embarrassed.

We were amazed by everything we saw. The main hall was decorated with reproductions of pictures by Van Dyck and Rembrandt: we had even forgotten their existence. We crowded round the ship's shop, which was stacked with chocolate and bottles of eau-de-Cologne, surely not for us too? A big Sergeant Major had some gramophone

records in his cabin, ones that we had known before the war. So there were places where life had remained unchanged during these last eighteen months after all! We would press a bell. Yes! It worked! (We had to apologise hastily to the waiter who came to answer it.) We turned on a tap. "It's a real tap, old man!" We should have been perfectly happy to spend the whole day washing our hands . . . and the sight of a genuine bath sent us into raptures! When we saw the table laid for a meal we became quite lyrical, and our eyes almost popped out of our heads when we sat down to our first English breakfast.

While we were still at Mitchurin, one of our men had made the following prophecy: "One night we shall board a cargo-boat. We shall be hustled down in a dark hold. On the docks the Russians will be shouting 'Davai, Davai' ('Hurry, Hurry!') while on board other men, whose faces we shall not even see, will shout 'Move along, Move along!'" Naturally, he hoped that he would be mistaken, but he never dreamt that he would be so completely wrong. If anyone should ever tell him that life is not a fairy-tale, he will reply, in the name of the 186, that life's fairy-tales are sometimes more incredible than the ones in children's story books.

More than the rediscovery of the joys of civilisation, it was the extraordinary welcome of the British that made our days on the *Empress of Canada* so precious and so memorable. We homeless tramps, who had been trembling lest anyone should try to make us ashamed of France, discovered that, in the eyes of the English and the Canadians, France was still the great France of the past, with all her virtues. Each minute brought us fresh proof of that affection which is stronger than that of mere brotherhood in arms. Those of us who were not familiar with the delicate tact of the British, found that it showed itself in the slightest gesture, or silence, as well as in the most



generous gifts. As soon as we had got on board, some English and Canadian officers, Bury, Walsh, Blake, Donald Murdoch, London and others, knocked at our cabin doors and brought one of their own uniforms for each French officer, so as to make us look presentable. French soldiers, English sailors and Canadian soldiers fraternised in the cabins and the ward-rooms. A reception was given on the first evening in honour of the escaped French officers where English, Canadian and French officers stood to attention side by side, fraternally united, and in unison sang 'La Marseillaise' and 'God Save the King'.

After such experiences, how could we not share the feelings of Captain Billotte on our last night on board, when he said: "They say that every man has two countries: his own and France. Gentlemen, in the tragic days through which we are now living, we can truly say that every Frenchman has two countries: France and England."

After our extraordinary journey, which led us from Paris to London via Moscow, after our miraculous escape back to life, our adventure must not end on a tame note. Far from it—there was yet another adventure in store for us, the Spitzbergen Raid of 1941.

While we were enjoying our return to civilised life, our ship was bearing us through seas, the White Sea, the Baring Sea and the Arctic Ocean, which in olden days were known only to explorers. In the distance we could see islands, mysterious Thules rising out of the mist, and icebergs floating towards us. The further North we went, the shorter the nights became, until at last there was only a short period of darkness towards midnight, though on the horizon the sky remained clear.

Then our day in the Isfjord began.

On his return from the North Pole, Maurice Constan-

tin-Weyer wrote *La Nuit de Magdalena*. Our day in the Isfjord also deserves its story. It was a day which lasted four days; no Rockefeller on a pleasure cruise could ever have experienced anything like it. I have a vivid picture in my mind. First of all there was the immobility and silence. The ship lay at anchor in an enormous amphitheatre of rocks. The slopes were covered with lichen and burnt-looking grass, and the fawn and ochre colouring, in a landscape where the only tones were whites, greys and blues, produced a sinister effect. This foreground was set against the magnificent whiteness of the Inlandsis glacier, where six wide channels of ice stretched down the mountain-side and joined together in one vast block on the shore. Behind us stretched the glassy waters of the Isfjord. At the foot of the glaciers the water was black, with white reflections here and there, but towards the middle it was a vivid blue. At night-time the ship looked as though it were resting on a sheet of emerald green. On the shore there was a little cluster of huts, an abandoned village of seal fishers, a village by the waterside on the edge of the world, like so many others throughout the ages: the first and last outposts of mankind.

Nothing disturbed the calm and solitude, neither the seagulls circling overhead, nor our exhilaration, nor the fact of war—and yet a British fleet lay anchored here, and before our eyes Barendsburg, glowing red under a high mushroom of smoke, was burning. . . . Five thousand tons of coal were burning in this wilderness of ice.

At midnight, between two whiskies, I went for a walk round the deck. The air was sharp and bitterly cold. The only sound was the sound of my footsteps on the boards. Every now and again I passed twin ack-ack gun-posts, and saw the huge shapes of the gunners in their magnificent Canadian furs.

Two officers, whom at first I did not recognise in their

British battle-dress, were leaning over the railings. I went up to them and saw that they were two of the escaped prisoners. They were thinking aloud:

"I don't seem to be able to sort out my thoughts," one of them was saying. "We were torn away from France fifteen months ago, and here we are to-day, only about 800 miles from the North Pole. We've been mouldering in the very depths of misery and here we are to-day wallowing in luxury. . . ."

"Well, now you really do belong to the category of those who've found their feet . . . ! Besides, if you're interested in the tricks of fortune, don't forget that the very same fate which has brought us to Spitzbergen might have doomed us to die the most miserable kind of death, through the interplay of interests which are completely strange to us and beyond our control. It is all very well to maintain that modern society is more and more concerned with achieving security: the fact remains that the means which destiny has at her disposal, and the range of possible alternatives, increase in vastness and variety as the social factors which determine our existence become more and more external to mankind. . . . And don't deceive yourself! France and Humanity as a whole have let us die with the utmost indifference. It's no good pretending to oneself! The truth of the matter is that society and nations don't give a damn for the physical freedom of individuals—they are too much preoccupied with other matters. The adventures and sufferings of individual human beings interest them only, if at all, as so many news items."

"You won't succeed in demoralising me. When in spite of the threat from German submarines, Admiral Vian sends half the destroyers of our escort out as far north as latitude 80° to search for and pick up the last trappers—the *last trapper*, in fact—before the Polar night descends

upon them, you should consider this as a very symbolical 'news item' . . . ."

"And profoundly moral. . . ."

"Perhaps; at any rate it is something which gives this war *its real meaning, or rather the meaning which we wish to give it*. Listen, old man, you must admit that the Europe of the concentration camps has not accustomed us to this kind of 'news item'. This one deserves to be marked with a monument, old chap! Can't you see in it the proof that the side we have chosen is fighting, if not for the good of the individual human being (I am being prudent), at least in order to prevent contempt for individual destiny and oppression from being erected into a system?"

"Why look so far ahead? After all, you don't have to be intelligent, nor wish to be intelligent, in order to live. . . ."

"Others say that you don't have to be free in order to live. . . . Personally I persist in believing that we are fighting for intelligence, too, and for the survival of intelligence afterwards. Neither Hitler nor Pétain have been able to stifle freedom of judgment in hearts and minds even behind barbed wire. In spite of the tremendous weight of indolence there are prisoners who are determined to defend their right to intelligence, even when there is no gleam of hope and when even right-minded people are incapable of resisting the double break-up of their thoughts and their incomes. These are important factors in the war. It is really the finest proof that we can give of our dignity. . . ."

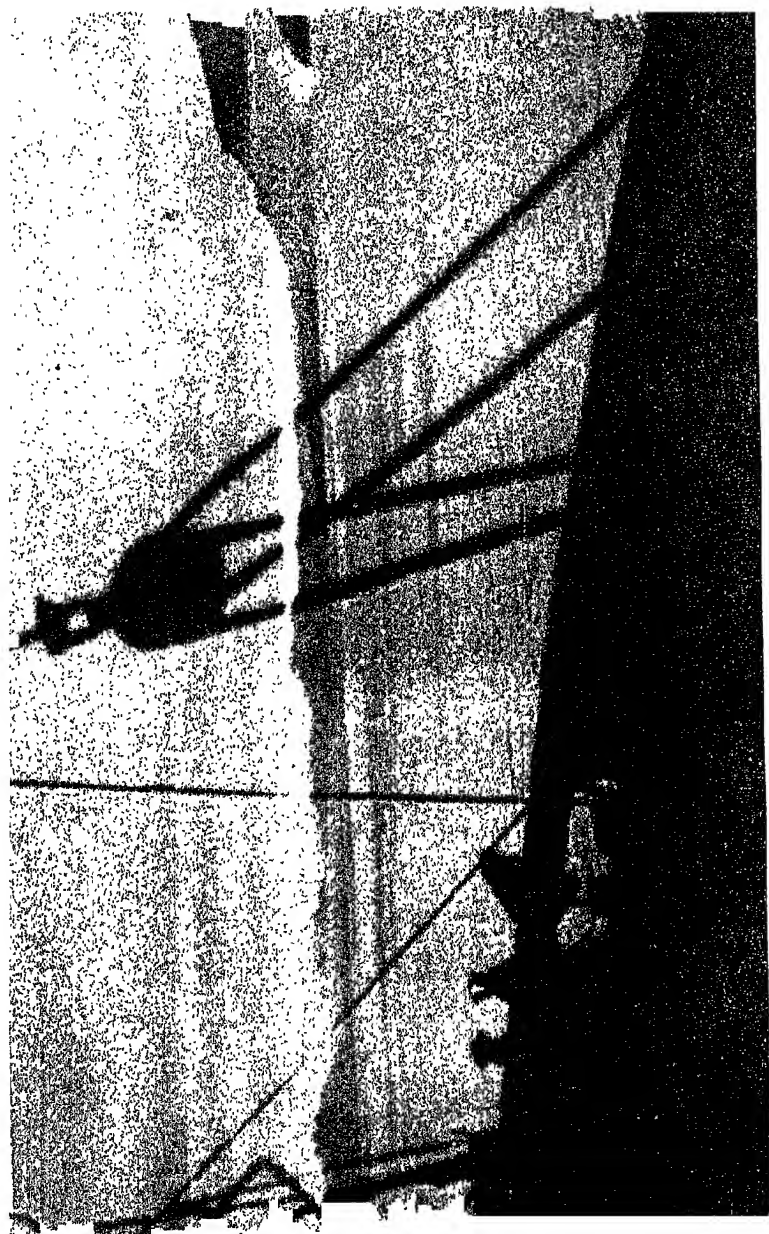
"What I have just told you, I would not have said a year ago, for at that time I didn't believe it. In a year from now the return to civilised life may have caused me to change my opinion again. But at this moment, after leaving Grazievitch, and standing here before this lunar

landscape and this town in flames, I am not ashamed of this lyrical act of faith. One may doubt man's ability to organise the world otherwise than by compulsion, one may question the issues of the human adventure. But I think one must refuse to let oneself despair of reason. Intelligence has been swamped, most certainly! But if one looks further than Charles Maurras and fat Rosenberg, one is forced to admit that intelligence has survived, without glory but not without merit, and never will intelligence be more necessary than after Germany's defeat. . . ."

The allied convoy entered the Isfjord on August 25th 1941. It was composed of the cruisers *Aurora* and *Nigeria*, of 5,000 and 9,000 tons respectively, destroyers, auxiliary craft, and the *Empress of Canada*, who carried, under the command of Brigadier-General Potts, detachments of two Canadian regiments, the Saskatoon Light Infantry and the Edmonton Regiment, as well as a company of sappers of the Royal Canadian Engineers. These formed the 'Force III'. An Infantry platoon had immediately seized the Cape Linne wireless station, and as soon as the population had been taken on board, the demolition work was begun. The purpose of this expedition was to prevent Germany from using the Spitzbergen resources. Since the Spring of 1940 it had become one of the German refuelling bases; moreover the Cape Linne wireless station had been transmitting daily meteorological bulletins to the Germans. Finally, quite recently the Germans had begun to build an electrical power station and a petrol refinery in the north of Norway for the Arctic coal. This is why the British authorities had decided, in agreement with the Norwegian and Soviet Governments, to destroy the coal-mining installations, the coal deposits and the wireless stations, and to evacuate the population, part of



AT SPITZBERGEN; FIRING THE COAL DUMPS



LEAVING SEITZBERGEN: THE MIDNIGHT SUN

whom were to go to Russia, the rest to England.

The demolition work lasted twelve days. In each concession the electrical plant, the cranes, machinery, reservoirs, mine-shafts, narrow-gauge railways, landing stages, etc. . . . were blown up. 500,000 tons of coal were sprinkled with petrol and set on fire. 250,000 gallons of petrol, refined and unrefined, were burnt or thrown into the sea. The two wireless transmitting stations of Cape Linne and Longyearbyen were spared up to the last minute and went on transmitting their meteorological bulletins to German wireless stations in Norway.

On the last day at Spitzbergen the French went ashore at Barendsburg, and for fourteen hours they helped the Canadians to embark their equipment. They were radiantly happy, because this was the first time, after eighteen months of forced labour and then enforced leisure, that they were able at last to do something useful, and of their own free will. This was their first step back into the war. They rushed about through clouds of smoke, and up and down the steep hillside, where the soot was so thick that it came up to their ankles. One man would carry an enormous load on his back, another would use a wash-tub as a sled and drag it down the slope. Buisson, dressed like an Eskimo, moved colossal weights without turning a hair, Cornilliet and Poily urged their men on. Amidst shouts and cries, 'France at work' was able to prove to herself what she was capable of achieving.\*

Towards ten o'clock in the evening, the Nigeria's sea-plane alighted on the sea with engine-trouble. It was two Frenchmen who rowed out to repair her. After the day's work we had supper on the beach. Among the stacks of

\*Order No. 15, issued by the Adjutant of Force III, dated Sept. 3rd 1941 said: "Congratulation to the troops of France Libre. All ranks of the Free French Forces who were on board the *Empress of Canada* are congratulated on the way in which they helped in the embarkation of civilians at Spitzbergen."



crates, Canadians and Frenchmen shared tins of corned beef and jam. An improvised cook put on an apron and fried some bacon. We ate huge chunks of ham and quantities of tinned pineapple swimming in delicious syrup. It was not on the *Empress of Canada* that we got our first real taste of life again, but on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, on a night of war.

From time to time the wind would blow a cloud of acrid smoke into our faces. On the beach the waves were rolling over the pebbles. Then, while we were waiting for the boats to come and take us back to the ship, we lit camp fires. The Canadians gathered round in silence. Then a voice began singing and others joined in. That Tuesday, September 2nd 1941, on the black pebbles of a Spitzbergen beach, in the northern twilight illuminated by Barendsburg in flames, fifty Free Frenchmen sang old French songs. . . .

From then on I have a series of vivid impressions in rapid succession. First of all the explosions of the last reservoirs—then the destruction of the wireless stations. Then leaving the Isfjord, with the distant glaciers glowing in the midnight sun, the convoy zigzagging across the Atlantic, with the warships, alongside the *Empress of Canada*, looking like ducks swimming round a swan. Now and again, as though she were tired of doing only twenty-two knots an hour, one of the ships at the head of the convoy would turn round, go to the end of the convoy, and then shoot forward again like an arrow: it gave one a marvellous impression of power and control. Before long Admiral Vian left us with a reduced escort, and went off with his cruiser towards the North Cape, where he sank a destroyer and three auxiliary craft without himself losing a single man. In the meanwhile Radio-Tromsøe was anxiously inquiring why Radio-Spitzbergen was silent. Then we steamed into the Firth of Clyde, with its

docks intact, and Glasgow intact in spite of Goebbel's assertions that there was not a stone left standing. Then we passed through the unbelievably rich English countryside. A cottage at the end of a lawn, a row of willows along a stream, a cow in a field—we marvelled at every fresh sight. . . . Then London at last! The train came to a standstill amidst wild cheering. We had all been leaning out of the windows, and in the distance, on the platform, we spotted French képis. . . . The French army still existed. . . . It was waiting for us. . . .

We alighted. A crowd immediately gathered round us, and we were taken to a specially prepared buffet decorated with the French colours. While the Euston Station-master walked about politely and solemnly, in his top-hat and buttonhole, we gave way to our joyful exuberance. Young girls handed us plates of cakes, talked to us, questioned us and were amazed. . . . Oremin held out his cup to have it filled by a 'Volontaire', and while she was pouring out the coffee his hand trembled so much that he almost upset his cup. The girl smiled, surprised that a man who had been through so much should still be so capable of feeling. She may not have realised, perhaps, that the tears which came into his eyes were due to everything combined: her smile, his first conversation with a young French girl, the képis, and the end of an adventure. . . .

## X

### AFTERWARDS. . . .

OUR adventure is over. We said good-bye to it on the platform at Euston Station, among the gold-braided képis, the cameras, the top-hats and the button-

holes. Now that it has sunk into the past it has acquired its true perspective and its true meaning. Our life during those endless months was only one of the minor dramas of the war, only a minor phase of the French revolt. Naturally we shall never forget our adventure, and the bond which unites us—however different we may be from one another—is everlasting. We are united in the same way as men who have been brought up together in their childhood: one word is enough to bring back to each man a crowd of memories. If you see an elegant captain saying "Good morning, old man!" to the orderly who opens the door for him, you must not be surprised. They are 'Russians'.

We don't care for celebrations, especially now that France is in mourning, but our hearts leap when by chance we hear the drinking song "trente et unième du mois d'aout". It was August 30th that:

"Nous vîmes venir sous l'vent, vers nous,  
Une frégate d'Angleterre,"\*

but our song is only one day out! Those of us who were still in England arranged to meet, on August 30th, last year. We were not numerous. We counted ourselves and read out a roll-call. How many of us were scattered all over the world! Borudy in Canada, Guyon in Egypt, Sauzeau in the Pacific, Tuyaret in India, Auzary seriously wounded, Landré killed at Bir-Hakeim, and Grandidier taken prisoner again. Our meeting was not a ceremony, but we devoted one minute's silence to the memory of those who held that the only possible choice lay between living as free men and dying—and who, in fact, did die.

Thus our adventure has marked us deeply and we are bound together by a thousand memories. Yet we refuse

\*"We saw, coming towards us, with the wind,  
A British ship."

to be the slaves of our past. Although we arrived here empty-handed, with only our adventures behind us, we do not intend to live on the past. We are always being asked to describe our adventures, but why does no one think of asking: "What of the future?" We are far from being saints and would loathe to play the role of prophets, but we do believe that we have a right to speak for to-day and for to-morrow. On landing, some of us said: "We'll get a fortnight or perhaps even a month in which to tell the truth as we know it." And yet we did not even know how to be rude. . . .

As I read these chapters over again, I reflect, yes, it is really I who have written them. But they fail to reveal any of our accumulated hopes and hatreds. We have not been able to get any of it off our chests. Sceptics may laugh and say: "It's always been like that." No, *not* always. In these days when there are no prophets except military ones, when men are mouldering away in concentration camps and no one dream to rise and shout the truth, it is essential that, now and again, some humble and isolated voice (like that of the messenger who in Medieval Mystery plays used to disturb the meals of the bad rich man)—the voice of men of goodwill should be raised to speak of the misery of the humble, and of the need for justice.

If we think we have a right to speak our minds for to-day and for to-morrow, and if I am daring to do so, it is not because we have suffered (so many have suffered more than we have), nor because for once in our lives we dared to act. It is because we have come back from another world, or rather from Hell, where we have left so many behind, and because from the day of our return we have wished to remain anonymous.

Those who read these lines, and who have done nothing, or who have done their duty but have lost the habit of

suffering for the last two or three centuries, must remember that we are witnesses of a world where suffering does exist. We have learnt this by our own experience, like all those who have escaped from the Continent. And when I speak of suffering, I am not thinking of physical suffering, the Feldwebel's blows or even the last night of a hostage, but I am thinking of that long-drawn-out misery, the collective wretchedness, the sordid monotony, the habit of patience, and the humility in hope which has brought Europe back to the worst hours of the year one thousand. When I hear the B.B.C. announcer saying: "To-day, 940th or 960th day of the French peoples' struggle for freedom," I know that this means that Europe's darkness has lasted for 940 or 960 or 1,000 days, and that, in the shadow of this darkness, hundreds of millions of men continue to struggle desperately, without shoes, without bread; and that even as I write, in Germany, with the automatic gesture I remember so well, twelve hundred thousand prisoners of war are rolling themselves up in their blankets, before blowing out their oil lamps, for the 940th or 960th or 1000th time. . . . Must I confess it? I am less moved by the thought of Landré who was killed in the Libyan desert than by that of the prisoners on the point of death whose every sigh is a murmur: "Lord, have pity on the house that was mine," and who have not the strength to keep alive until their repatriation. . . .

It is because we are closely bound up with this world of suffering that we feel so much hatred for those who wallow in such comfort as they still enjoy, and whose only desire both in France and elsewhere is to go back to *the good old days*. I have to write this, or I should not be able to forgive the two Frenchmen who thought fit to offer me champagne on my first night in London. "The good old days!" Hypocrites who lounge about in the bar of the

'Majestic' or in the night-clubs of Broadway or Algiers! Poor wretches stretched on your lilos at the Oflag! As though there were any question of 'good old days' at a time when Lies rule as master, and Freedom has been abolished from the North Cape to the Caucasus, and when people are put before firing squads at Nantes and guillotined in enslaved Paris.

It is also because we are convalescents of freedom that we maintain that it is necessary, imperative indeed, to say "NO!" and to rise out of the mire, to overthrow lying idols, to refuse the complicity of silence, to condemn, to thrash, to hate.\*

One should not infer from this that we are incapable of anything but hatred: but we should be lowering ourselves if we did not know how to give hatred for hatred. Our advice to those who have done too little is that they should not pretend that they shared in sentiments which they did not possess. But we shall not spare those who have shed innocent blood, nor trust a word of those who pride themselves on having lied cleverly. Because we have known fear and hunger, we shall never forgive those who have betrayed the mind and said, on mornings when hostages were shot: "We wash our hands of it"; nor shall we forgive the prudent ones who closed their eyes to their fellow-beings' sacrifices as long as they themselves could go on eating expensively at Drouant's for 300 francs. Why should we have mercy on them, when our hearts and bodies have so much right to hate?

In affirming this duty of intransigence, we are also responding to something which cries out from the depths of our being. We must become men conscious and worthy of the name, since we are convinced that if we wish to see

\*"How is it that you feel no hatred for us, when for two years we have been taught to hate you?" an officer of the Armistice commission asked Captain de Boissieu.

France again and witness her resurrection in freedom, we shall have to be worthy of it.

Yes, to be men and to be worthy of France, these are our first two duties, and to us they seem almost one and the same. Unintentionally Germany taught us a lesson: that to surrender as a man and to surrender France sometimes amounts to the same thing; while to persevere as a man and to persevere in France is sometimes also the same thing, and that sometimes to be fanatical as a man, and fanatical about France, is to have only one passion. A Frenchman, however isolated, even when he is a prisoner and the simplest of peasants, is still the trustee of a certain degree of liberty, the witness of a world that wishes to go on believing in universal values. This is something the Germans have never been able to grasp. For, when they are alone and without a system into which they can become integrated, they seem incapable of existing as men, but become like so many scattered parts of a broken machine. A Frenchman, on the contrary, is content to be an individual and insists on remaining an individual. Being French means making an effort to be completely and really a man, and feeling *'responsable'*. "C'est connaître la honte en face d'une misère qui ne semblait pas dépendre de soi, c'est être fier d'une victoire que les camarades ont remportée, c'est sentir, en posant sa pierre, que l'on contribue à bâtir le monde."<sup>\*</sup>

It is this responsibility which we wish to take upon ourselves. We have been through agonising hours, but we are not the only ones to have suffered. Besides, suffering is not an honour and we do not want to be pitied by others. Far from wishing for pity or leniency, we refuse to say: "Well, we've done the best we could. Whatever

<sup>\*</sup>"It is to feel ashamed of suffering for which one did not seem responsible, to be proud of a victory which one's comrades have won, to feel, as one places one's stone, that one is helping to build the world."  
—A. de Saint-Exupéry.



GENERAL BILLOTTE (CENTRE) AND SOME OF THE MEN

*British Official Photo*





IN ENGLAND: DESCHAMPS (WEARING CAP), TESTAIL (LAST ON RIGHT)

*Photo Film & News*

has happened, or will happen, is no longer our concern." On the contrary, we wish to bear the weight of *all* responsibilities and to be among those who boast least of their efforts. When we escaped we were anxious to escape from passivity as well as from slavery. We did everything within our power to *risk more*. No matter what happened, we refused to give in. Half a dozen of us had every chance of being repatriated with the minimum disloyalty, and sometimes without any compromise at all—but we preferred to owe nothing to anyone but ourselves. Later, when we were on the landing-stage at Archangel, waiting to be taken on board, do you think a single one of us dreamt of kneeling down to make an act of submission or an act of faith?

If the world behaves badly we accept our share of responsibility in so far as, being Frenchmen, we were not vigilant enough to watch over the world while watching over ourselves. And, if there are not enough of us, or if liberation has to wait, we accept our share of the blame. When people are fighting and dying for the freedom of the world, we wish to share in the sacrifice. The weight of the world and its sorrows is not too heavy for us. We are sick of publicity and propaganda; but we wish it to be known that the blood is boiling in our veins and that we only long to offer it up. For us, the time of trial, the time of the hardest trials, is not over, but lies in the future. We may be crushed to death, no matter! We are not fighting for fun, just as we did not escape for fun. . . .

We joined de Gaulle. We did not know him. More cut off from the world than the Frenchmen in France—not one of us had ever heard his voice. Often we asked ourselves: "Who is he? . . . What is he like? . . . Is it possible that with all his great record he should only be an adventurer? . . ." And, in truth, what guarantee had we that we should be anything but the instruments of his

personal ambitions, supposing he had any? Yet when, between Mitchurin and Grazievitch, we sang:

“Pour combattre avec de Gaulle  
Souviens-toi, souviens-toi  
Qu'il faut s'taper pas mal de tôle . . .”

to fight with de Gaulle appeared to us to be a reward. De Gaulle was the man in whom we placed our hope; we had sworn allegiance and gratitude to him, because he had taken responsibility upon himself, he had a clear and penetrating vision of the situation, he acted and took up the fight. Moreover, it was because when the world was ruled by lies his hands were clean, and because he was the only Frenchman we could accept as a leader. It never entered our heads for a moment that our plebiscite on his name could have been anything but unanimous.

We know the price of freedom too well to tolerate the slightest hypocrisy in a democracy; how can we respect those who, even if they have not actually profited by the sufferings of others, have become, through passivity the accomplices of their hangmen? Why should we begin to lie to ourselves? If there is one thing to which we shall remain faithful, unswervingly faithful, it is to the *meaning* of our adventure. People will say that the meaning only became apparent to us in retrospect. Never mind. For us, escape was not a matter of running away, it was a refusal to accept. It was not an escape from what had happened, but a return to the struggle. A revolutionary myth of escape has gradually evolved within us, and though this was more a result of chance than our own doing, we shall not deny this myth. We are escaped men, and we shall remain escaped men. We have an advantage over our comrades who are still prisoners: that of having

surmounted the inferiority-complex of defeat and the obsession of 'revengé'. As barbed wire and sentries could not restrain us, we know that we shall not allow ourselves to be bound by new chains, whether in the guise of respectability, opportunism, imperialism, cliques, antiquated political parties, or military dictatorships; and if it should ever be necessary to fight in the streets, in order to win freedom by breaking the chains of the past, those who have risked their lives crossing frontiers will not be slow to act.

One September morning, when the sky was clear and the barrage balloons were so high above London that they looked like minute silver toys, we found ourselves with new names and dressed, head to foot, in new clothes. It was like baptism and marriage combined. We had rushed passionately into France Combattante. Now, after the German sands, the Russian steppes, the Spitzbergen ice, we were treading on the rich soil of England. We said nothing. Most of us, old and young alike, shouldered our kitbags and rifles, without a moment in which to realise how easy it is to become an 'émigré'. Once more we set out—as the last of us will, before long, and as so many of us, during the last three years, have set out—towards new frontiers and foreign skies, courageously, but not without apprehension . . . in quest of the uncertain road which will lead back to France.

